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The Farm by the Lake

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This novel contains approximately 88,000 words which, in order to save paper, have been compressed within 226 pages. There are many more words on each page than would be desirable in normal times; margins have been reduced and no space has been wasted between chapters. The length of the average novel is between 70,000 and 90,000 words which, ordinarily, make a book between 228 and 320 pages. This novel would ordinarily make a book of about 320 pages.

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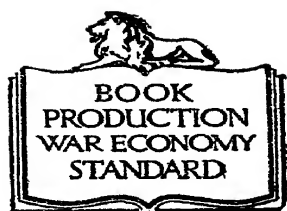
CRICHTON PORTEOUS

The Farm by the Lake



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Chapter 1

LUCKY ones strolling Morecambe front often pointed north over the silver-blue water to the smudge fifteen miles away and described it pityingly as Barrow.

“Fancy living all your life under that . . . !”

Fortunately, those who had to live beneath the cloud were not aware of their awful fate. To them the soiled air was natural; and when any had the good chance to get away to Grange over Sands, or even five miles down coast to Aldingham, or a little farther to Baytree, they never thought that day-time at Barrow should be just as bright; they accepted the sparkle and beautiful white light as somehow due to the sea's magic.

Flo, now that the date of her leaving Barrow was nearly come, wondered how she would live away from the town that had always been her home. Had she done right? What would it be like at . . . ? Oh, such a queer name: M-O-S-S-D-Y-C-H-E she spelt slowly, half aloud; but how did you say it? she wondered. Ditch, or should it be like dike?

Along narrow Dalton Road she wandered among the slow-moving shoppers. Probably ever since she had been able to walk alone she had gone down Dalton Road on Saturday morning, and then across to the Market behind the red Town Hall. Why she had always gone in there she could not have told. All she knew was that she liked it. On cold, wet days, it was sheltered there under the ridged glass roof; and even on such a good March day as this it seemed nicer than in Dalton Road, perhaps because of a greater feeling of friendliness and intimateness that there was among the stalls. How much better it was, for instance, to see all the things piled up without a glass front to keep you away. And how much nicer stall-keepers were than shop people who, as soon as you went in at the door, swooped down just as if you were an interloper, or a thief even. The stall-keepers let you look as long as you liked; they simply went on chatting with friends at the next stall, or shouting across the passage-way to friends there.

Flo always stopped longest at the flower stalls, though she liked the piled vegetables, also. But to-day the market only increased her sadness. Although indubitably she was there, she had a queer feeling that she was not really there; not a real part of it as she had always felt before; as if she were half a stranger already. She was glad to reach Mrs. Mawson's which was against the wall. These side-stalls were considered the best, by florists anyway, because staging could be built up and backward in long steps, the top step perhaps ten feet from the ground. As she got near, Flo was aware of a yellowness, and then she saw that the stall was smothered with daffodils, hundreds, perhaps thousands, brief-stalked, small and delicate.

"Oo, how lovely!" she couldn't help exclaiming; and Mrs. Mawson looked round from serving and smiled and said naturally, "Aren't they?" and then went on counting and dropping coppers into a woman customer's long pale hand.

Flo stood under the stall front and looked up and seemed to feel cleanness coming from the daffodils, as if they had brought some of the wood's freshness with them.

"I got 'em from the Keg . . . you know the Keg, the planting up by Albertside?" said Mrs. Mawson.

"No," said Flo, still looking at the daffodils.

"Eh, I'll have to take you," said her friend.

"I'm goin' away," said Flo. "On Monday."

"For a holiday?" asked Mrs. Mawson with sympathetic gladness.

"No; to work," said Flo. "To a farm."

"Eh, now. Fancy that. . . . You on a farm! It's hard work, though. Who's are you going to?"

"It's at a place called Mossd-y-c-h-e," said Flo, spelling the end, "in Derbyshire."

"In Derbyshire!" exclaimed Mrs. Mawson. "Is there no work nearer than that? You'll have got it through them Home folk, eh? I wouldn't go . . . I wouldn't let any girl of mine go. What for do they want to send you so far off?" she demanded energetically. "Eh now!" This, however, was not for Flo but for a woman in a tight-fitting blue Harris costume. "Twopence a bunch; morning picked," went on Mrs. Mawson in the same matter-of-fact energetic way.

"Twopence! Why, they're only wild; a penny is ample . . . you get them for nothing."

"But I don't live on nothing; an' I've a husband as can't, either, though he can't do anything," retorted Mrs. Mawson.

"I'm afraid you all tell tales like that," said the woman with a mechanical unfriendly smile. "If you'll let me have them at a penny I'll take twelve bunches." She lifted her handbag as if to undo the clip.

"Nothing doing," said Mrs. Mawson in her husky man-like voice. "Twopence a bunch."

The woman went on.

"You've got to stick up to those sort," said Mrs. Mawson. "If I gave way once she'd be back barging me down every week. You've got to keep straight against them folks . . . when you're like me with a chap as is useless dependin' on you."

"I wish I could stick up for myself like you do," said Flo. "I'd have . . ."

"You've *got* to stick up for yourself on this job," Mrs. Mawson broke in. "And if you're going away on a farm, you'll have to stick up for yourself, or you'll get all the dirty work. Where d'you say?" Flo repeated the name in the same way. "Never heard of it," said Mrs. Mawson, turning to serve another customer with two bunches.

"Don't they tell you anything about them?" she asked, turning back again. "Sending you all that way and you don't know a thing! I shouldn't wonder it'll be someone like her as wanted 'em twelve a penny: them are the sort as takes on through Homes and Help-you schemes and all that . . ."

"I don't know," said Flo. "I'm fed up doing nothin'. And I get a dress ar' . . ."

"I bet you do," interrupted her friend, "pay out of your wage. I know . . . so they have you tied and working for nothing. It's a damn swindle. When d'you say you go?"

"Monday."

"Eh, then I shan't be seeing you again," said Mrs. Mawson, her tone quite altered. "Perhaps they'll turn out all right, you know. There's good folk as well as bad. . . . Here, I mustn't let you go without something; which d'you like?"

She held up two bunches taken from different places.

"I've no . . . no money," said Flo.

"Money . . . who mentioned money?"

"Oh, those then," said Flo, indicating the right-hand bunch. "They look so . . . so lovely." The word she was searching for was "dainty", but it didn't come into her mind till too late. "I like these whitey petals round them," she added, touching them gently.

"Yes, you'd wonder how they'd come out in the cold and the wind. But these are dearest; you should have these," said Mrs. Mawson. "These are out of the garden . . . double ones. Most folk prefer 'em."

"I don't," said Flo, raising the tight little boss of wild flowers to her nose. They had a very slight cool-leaves smell, which she wouldn't have said was nice, but which somehow excited her. "Oh, if only I could see them all," she exclaimed.

"Here, take these as well," said Mrs. Mawson, abruptly holding the garden bunch out. "I've plenty, and they're not sellin'."

"Oh, but you know they will; it's early," protested Flo, though strangely tempted.

"Early, nothing; take them," ordered Mrs. Mawson. "I know what I can give better than you, don't I? You'll be telling me my own business next. Here's a customer; I can tell by the looks of 'em. Watch me sell . . ."

Flo stood at the stall corner and toyed with the flowers. In the wild bunch there were thirty or forty all tied tightly together as if for companionship; but of the double daffs there were only a dozen with a piece of spruce fir and a piece of wild ivy. These flowers were deeper, egg-yolk, and the dark evergreens set them off, so that for a moment she wondered whether, after all, they weren't the prettier.

"See," said Mrs. Mawson, jingling coins in the pocket of her black apron. "What did I tell you? Three bunches, and no grousing, either. Them's the sort. If I'd known you'd wanted a job, I wouldn't have minded asking someone like her. You should 'a told me."

"I wish I had," said Flo. "It's very good of you. I'll write, if I can, sometime, if you'd like . . ."

"Yes, do. Good-bye."

Flo went on through the market, but she was thinking too

much about what was going to happen to her to feel any more interest in the stalls. She turned out at the first door and behind the Town Hall. As she was walking up to the main street she saw Sally Gore crossing with a Navy man. Sally had her hair in long swaying ringlets and was looking up at the sailor with a laugh as if she had known him for years, which Flo didn't think likely because never before had she seen them together. But, of course, Sally always had been able to get friends anywhere. Flo held back, aware of her loneliness again; and then all at once she felt that it would be a good thing when she got away. She would be able to start fresh. Here everybody knew her, and everything about her, and didn't bother with her; but there she wouldn't be so . . . so . . . Well, she'd stick up for herself, as Mrs. Mawson said. And perhaps she'd find someone; and forgetting her flowers she began to look about for the kind of man that she thought she'd like to walk out with. In Duke Street she came unexpectedly into a rush, all the men and boys loosed from the shipyard, jostling and mostly jovial because of pay-day and the afternoon's freedom before them. They took no notice of her, and to avoid being bumped into she had to stand against the front of the Town Hall. Most of the men were oil-smudged and dirty, their caps greasy, overalls tattered. Flo was used to these things and looked only for faces, but talking and grinning they went past so fast that there was no time to choose. They were a blur and she gave up, and in less than five minutes the younger men were past and there were only the less eager ones, all probably married. She wondered where Jack Oates was; Jack who had gone to sea, nobody knew exactly how or where. She remembered how he had been truant from school for two days and then when they went out for afternoon playtime he had been there behind the shelter and had boasted about the job he had got. After that none of them had seen him for more than nine months till again he had turned up at the school gates, but this time he had been hardly recognisable, he had grown so and broadened. It wasn't this, however, that had impressed Flo particularly, but the carefree change in him; he seemed so reliant and dependable that all at once she had felt that she wanted to hold his hand and have him look after her. Only,

of course, he had not taken any notice of her. She had stood disregarded and seen him go off with five of the eldest boys, and the only thing that she had to be thankful about was that he had ignored Sally Gore and all the other girls as well.

Now the coming of men towards Flo had ended. Instead she was in a weaker flow of office girls and men setting across the bridges towards Barrow and Walney Islands; in the flow but not of it, because all these persons ignored her, passing, talking busily together. Most of the girls were neat and obviously satisfied with themselves, going along with their shoulders slightly swaying and high heels tapping on the smooth, worn macadam. Flo had no idea how different her own manner was; she simply went on, carrying the daffodils, not for show, but as if they were precious. Now she was clear of the buildings and on the first bridge, and a cool wind from off the bay hidden beyond the channel bend flickered the pale petals of her flowers and toyed with the crinkled trumpets. She stopped, facing the wind, looking over the heavy metal balustrade. Immediately beneath by the wharf so that she looked on it as from the top of the mast was a small coaster. The deep hold was nearly empty. Alongside were six railway trucks loaded with new crates, three feet high cubes, and she wondered what was in them and where the vessel would take them. How strange it was, she thought, that she had been at that place so often and seen so many ships and yet she had hardly any idea of where any of them went or of what they took. There was a man sitting side-saddle as it were on the ship's counter, occasionally sending up a blue curl of smoke from a cherry-wood pipe and gazing down the water, a fatherly kind of a man, and she wished that he had been nearer, then she would have asked where the ship had been and where it had to go to. She felt vaguely sorry that she had not got to know more about the ships before . . . before now when she was leaving them.

On the far side of the channel about a hundred yards below the bridge was the new battleship which seemed to have been there for years, as if it never would be ready. Although everybody in Barrow spoke of it as the "new" battleship, Flo thought that it really looked old already and shabby. This was because of its paint, which was all shades of grey

mixed with black and ochre rust-stains from bolts. Even the deck did not yet seem to be finished, and there were gaps in its edge showing against the mottled sky from where she stood, adding to the vessel's appearance of dilapidation. To Flo it didn't look anything like worth seven millions of pounds. If only someone had given her just a bit of all that money, she thought longingly, she wouldn't have to be going away. What would she have done with it? For several minutes her thoughts drifted pleasantly among hats and coats and dresses that she had seen in shops on Dalton Road, and she pictured herself as pretty as a bride in the *Daily Sketch* which her mother occasionally brought home after she'd been charring.

This happy drift of Flo's stopped when a stronger wind puff went searching coldly over her shoulders under her frock. She clutched the wings of her worn rabbit-skin collar together with her free hand and started on across the bridge again. Why couldn't she have a bit of the money that was being spent on the battleship? she wondered. She'd heard them say, and it had been in the *North-Western Daily Mail* that the battleship had been given to Barrow to build so that they should all have something to do. But it hadn't given her anything to do. That was why she was having to go away. Why hadn't the battleship helped her? She looked towards it now feeling resentment, as if it's great unsightly bulk had somehow picked her out for unfair treatment while being fair to everybody else. And then all at once she realized how foolish this thought was, and a smile shaped her lips and her rounded cheeks showed a dimple each, and she knew that she was really proud of the vessel, as everybody in Barrow was; and that she had really been looking forward to the time when it would at last be ready, a big fine sight, going off round the world for the King. Now it would probably go off without her seeing it again. She had never thought that that would happen.

Her dimples smoothed out and she turned soberly to go back. But now the red flag was up and traffic was being stopped. She wondered what it was for and noticed people gathering against the other balustrade. She crossed and saw two tugs manœuvring with a submarine between them. The nose of the submarine was high like a whale snout, but its tail shaped away long and thin, almost as though it were a silver

pencil lying along the water. One tug had a hawser belayed to the bow and the other tug had a hawser from the tail. Flo, however, was not interested in the manœuvring, for on the submarine's curved flank, with feet caught on a narrow ledge only just above the water line, lay a youth in greasy purple overalls. He lay back apparently exceedingly content and unaware of the increasing crowd peering down. His gaze was into the depth of water gently slipping past, though every now and then he glanced forward to where a small Union Jack waved gently at the submarine's prow. Flo seemed suddenly to know his thoughts : how proud he felt, and how he was thinking on into the future when he might be captain of such a vessel. She felt a great surge of sympathy towards him and wished that she could be at his side, slipping smoothly along without effort. His face, she thought, was "roguish". Although now he was so quiet and thoughtful, he looked as if he was of the kind that laugh naturally very easily. He moved his left hand and touched up the broad peak of his cap and his hair showed nearly the colour of Lyle's golden syrup, which was the colour of her own hair. Now the first tug was pulsing slowly between the divisions of the bridge and the submarine followed obediently till Flo could no longer see it because of the crowd round about and because of the bridge structure. She hurried across the roadways and stared over from the opposite side. There up channel was a floating dock with a small steamer high and dry between its arms like a toy. The tug seemed a long time coming through, and Flo waited impatiently, afraid that the youth might be gone. But he was there nonchalant, undisturbed. She felt that she could have thrown her flowers right on to him. She imagined the surprise that it would have given him; though also she felt sure that he would have liked it, and probably he would have grabbed the flowers safe from the water and have waved them, and perhaps have looked up and have guessed who had thrown them. And this, of course, would lead to a meeting; she would go to the dock gates, or he would come up on the bridge. Anyway, they would meet, and then . . .

Poor Flo. Actually the youth had never looked up; and had he done, he could not have picked her out among all the rest. Nevertheless, she enjoyed this second brief daydream,

and when the bridge was lowered back, she went on again more cheerfully, homeward.

Quite as she had expected, there was no one in. From the rustied biscuit tin in the dark space under the stairs that was "the pantry", she brought out a half-loaf and ate four thick slices thinly scraped over with margarine and tinned raspberry jam. She drank weak tea brewed in a jade green teapot with the spout lip chipped off. That was her "dinner", Ma came in just after four, red-faced and tired.

"What do they take me for?" she demanded as soon as she saw Flo. "A mug. Supposed to finish at one . . . an' see what time it is! 'You won't mind stayin' to wash pots, will you, Mrs. Royer?'"

She dragged off her black felt hat and crushed it on the dresser among the crumbs and pushed up the streaks of dark hair from over her ears and forehead and flopped into the wooden armchair as Flo got up.

"Won't mind? Oh no! But what if I'd said as I did?" She sighed and Flo moved the daffodils three inches nearer, hoping that she would notice, but with her elbow on the table she went on: "Give me mi dinner, of course . . . cold potatoes as they don't want . . . fish . . . *boiled*, mind you! Boiled," she repeated as if it was the greatest insult.

Flo stood by and looked at the daffodils in the glass jam-jar and wondered when they would be noticed, only now Ma was looking into the fire. She put her feet on the fender where the black enamel had been worn off showing the bright metal.

"Talked an' talked an' never got up till after two," she went on, but more mildly, as if telling a tale that was done with. "My feet, I don't know what's wrong with them; I can't do what I could," she added a little pathetically.

"I wish I wasn't going away," said Flo.

"Sure, an' what else could I do but say 'Yes' when they was so good to get you the chance?" asked her mother. "Missis wouldn't have heard . . ."

"Why wouldn't she let me go an' do what you do, and you stay home?" Flo demanded. "Then I needn't . . ."

Ma stiffened all at once and looked up. "Huh, I can do it," she announced. "We'll both be makin'; an' I won't have you to always be paying out for. How d'you think I

do? It's pay, pay all the time. Hasn't Ivy come yet?"

"No," said Flo, and turned to the cupboard by the right of the fireplace and began to take out blue-edged cups and saucers and plates, and to lay them on the table.

"It's time she'd come; we never know when she's coming, these days," said Mrs. Royer. "When I was a girl I had to be in straight from work or they'd want to know the reason. Nowadays, it's please yourself."

Flo ducked into the hole under the stairs again and brought the bread out once more and began to cut thinner slices.

"You wouldn't have a piece of toast, Ma?"

"Toast; you wouldn't want toast with my teeth."

Flo put the jam tin out and swilled the teapot. The kettle had just begun to splutter when the back door let in a girl two years older and three inches taller than Flo. Her hair was lighter, but most of it was stuffed into a mob-cap of print, cream with a little pattern of blue moss-roses. Her brown coat had a right-angle tear near the second button, and one of her brown shoes was laced with black tape.

"What-ho, just in time, eh?" And she tossed mob-cap and coat on the dresser end and settled on a chair by her mother, but faced to the table.

"Where've you bin?" asked Mrs. Royer.

"What's this . . . a giddy celebration 'cos Flo's going?" Ivy asked, looking at the daffodils.

"What's what?" Mrs. Royer squirmed round and stared. "Eh, now!" she exclaimed. "Wouldn't your father have liked them?"

"Would 'e?" said Ivy, indifferent. "Where are they from, anyway? You haven't bin spendin' on them? They were two-pence, them wild ones. . . . I heard someone askin'. And I bet the others was more."

"Where did they come from?" demanded Mrs. Royer, as if quite at a loss.

"Mrs. Mawson gave them . . . 'cos I'm going," said Flo. "I thought you'd have noticed."

"I'll take some to-night; they'll look as if I'm the belle of the ball. Let's have a drink; I'm as dry as I'd been eatin' salt," Ivy said.

"Where you goin' to-night?" asked Mrs. Royer, sluthering

her chair so that she faced partly to the table and partly towards her elder daughter. "You're always goin' somewhere; when I was your age . . ."

"I know," Ivy answered, "but I bet you did, all the same. Anyway, I'm goin' to Ted's; you know it's his sister's twenty-first. We all give threepence at the works an' bought a handbag . . . that's where I've been this after', if you want to know."

She took a careful suck from the edge of her cup.

"I wish it 'ud been mine. Blue, with gold leaves, an' a silver clip. A beaut! Three-an'-six."

"Who chose it?" asked her mother, very interested.

"All of us; well, we all went in."

"Lucky, she is. When I was twenty-one they didn't give me any han'-bag. You don't know you're born."

Mrs. Royer fished for a tea-leaf with the tip of her little finger and flicked it on to the rag rug.

"Where was it from?" she asked, her disapproval of modern practices forgotten.

"Walker's . . . oh, but they had a real bag, Ma. Morocco with a gold chain handle. Three quid!" Ivy rolled her blue eyes. "By God, wait till my twenty-first . . ."

Flo did not speak but she watched her sister's expressive face and her mother's slow eating. How many teeth her mother had Flo did not know, but it was not many. Mrs. Royer continually shifted her food from one side to the other trying to get it to where she could deal with it.

"Three quid for a bag! I'd never pay that." She took a slow drink. "If I had it, I'd buy a costoom as I saw in Dickie's; green, with a kind of speck, darker than what the rest were."

"I saw it. Gosh, Ma, but you'd look like a mountaineer," Ivy exclaimed. "But did you see . . .?"

For ten minutes they talked like that while Flo sat quiet. She had not seen the things, though ordinarily she would have joined in, but now she did not feel like it. Then the meal was finished and she began to side. Ivy said she'd help to wash up, only then she went upstairs and apparently forgot. When she came down she had a bundle of clothes on her arm and at once asked where the kettle was.

"I washed up with it, of course," said Flo.

"You would. What the hell do I do for a wash?" asked Ivy.

She began to change on the rug, stripping to her vest while Mrs. Royer sat and watched and drank more tea and asked her about the sailcloth works.

"Jenny got a needle through her finger . . . put her finger right underneath, the mug."

"Jenny who . . . not Bob Milsom's girl?"

"Yes," said Ivy. "I wish they'd put me on a machine instead of the damn rope job. But they sacked three more to-day, so what a bloody hope . . ."

"What happened to her?" asked Mrs. Royer.

"Oh, pulled the needle right through, so they said, an' sent her off . . . infirmary, I suppose. She fainted."

Mrs. Royer said "Oo!" and lifted her hand and stared at it, as though afraid that there might be a steel needle through one of her fingers. "I must tell Mrs. Dower; she knows Milsom's wife. Went to school together."

She stirred on her chair. Flo sat on the fender and Ivy in a brown creased cotton petticoat went to the washing-up tin and ran a little cold water into-it and dabbed gingerly with her finger tips.

"Uh, I'll not bother; I'll get a wash when I get there . . . they'll have some hot water. Not like this hole."

Mrs. Royer did not seem to hear.

Ivy dried her fingers and then with the damp place of the grey-looking towel rubbed round her neck. Her dress was a deep red velvet, paler where she sat and where the insides of her elbows rubbed. But it suited her, and when she had brushed her hair, which was fine and stood out with a natural waviness, she had a distinct, though rather untidy, attractiveness.

"I think I'll come with you," said Mrs. Royer all at once.

"I could do with a bit of a jollification."

"You . . . you'll only spoil it. I thought you said you were goin' to tell Mrs. Dower about Jenny," said Ivy. "They won't want you at a twenty-first. And you've not had an invite."

"I don't suppose Ted's ma would mind. It's usually the

more the merrier at those doos. I'd see that you didn't get too gay, then, my girl. You'd do with a . . ."

Flo, who had been hoping that her mother would stay in for their last Saturday night together, was about to add her protest to Ivy's when the thought occurred to her in time that if her mother learned that both of them were set against her going, there was nothing more likely to make her determine to go.

"Well, I'm off," Ivy announced. "You can do what you like. But I hope to God you don't come."

She snicked the door latch decisively and they heard her steps die away up the pavement.

"She hasn't taken any of the daffs and I'm glad. I thought you'd like them," said Flo, to take her mother's thoughts off the party. "It was good of Mrs. Mawson; I hope Mrs. . . . what is it? Mrs. Nadin's like her. What a funny name, isn't it?"

"Who?" asked Mrs. Royer vaguely.

"Nadin, isn't it? You know, where I'm going . . ."

"Oh, ay. *She'll* be all right. They wouldn't send you if they didn't know that. Missis said . . ." But the sentence stopped there, as if she had forgotten what it was.

Flo sat on the little three-legged wooden stool on the right by the fire and looked up at her mother's face which was pink in the glow.

"I don't know. . . . Mrs. Mawson says it's just a way of getting girls to go cheap. D'you really . . .?"

"Oh, that's what she give 'em you for, is it? To upset you," said Mrs. Royer. "Well, tell her to mind her own business and keep 'er flowers next time."

"But I'm sure she didn't. . . . It was just because I'm going," protested Flo, turning to see the flowers which also were caught by the fire light. The wavering of the flames made the daffodils appear to flicker as if being disturbed by a gentle wind.

"It's likely," commented Mrs. Royer scoffingly. "I know Milly Mawson. Ah, well, I think I'll go and see Mrs. Dower. Fancy Jenny doing that. She must have been careless some'ow. Though I've heard tell as them machines is pretty awful."

With an unexpected gush of energy she got up and turned to the door where her things had been hung.

"Oh, but," protested Flo. "My things came this morning after you went. I thought you'd stay."

"What things?"

"Clothes," said Flo, standing up. "I didn't want to say while Ivy was here. I was afraid she'd want to borrow . . ."

"Where are they?" asked Mrs. Royer, turning back. "Have they *all* come? Why didn't you say?"

"D'you think I might wear them to-morrow? It wouldn't matter one day beforehand."

"It's what they're for," said Mrs. Royer. "Course you wear 'em. Where are they?"

Flo opened the door in the end wall by the fireplace and ran up the closed-in stairs to the bedroom where the three of them had to sleep in one bed. The box was under the bed at her own side by the window and all the time that Ivy had been up she had been nervous. But the box was as she had left it with the string in a loose bow. She carried it gently as though the contents were brittle, and lowered it on to the table in the manner of putting down a tray. Mrs. Royer stood by while the bow was pulled, the lid taken off, and the tissue paper was put back. On top with arms folded was the neatest costume jacket that Flo had seen. It was blue serge with narrow red braid on the collar, reverses and cuffs. She picked it up by the shoulders and held it over her bust, too eager for her mother to see how it suited her even to have time to put it on.

"Isn't it lovely?" she exclaimed, turning sideways to get the best light.

Mrs. Royer stared, and then reached for the cuff to feel the soft ribbed texture, and finally she stroked it, unable to take her hand away.

"You've never had anythin' like *that*," she managed to say at last, as if only just getting her breath.

Flo laughed and looked down again.

"Does it fit?" asked Mrs. Royer suddenly.

Flo began to get into it, but her thick tartan frock was a nuisance.

"I've got to let you see everything; I must take my frock off," she explained, stopping unexpectedly.

She tried to drag her frock off without undoing the belt, and had to let it down and start over again. Her green petticoat was off in a jiff and then her flannel knickers and she reached into the box and drew out new knickers and a petticoat of pale blue cotton.

"My word!" ejaculated Mrs. Royer.

"There's vests. Two of everything," said Flo, beginning to step into the costume skirt. It was tight at the waist, but she held her breath while she got the two hooks into the eyes. She smoothed the creases in front and drew her open hands down from her waist behind and was delighted by the close feel of it. "But only one blouse," she murmured with the slightest hint of regret. She dropped the blouse quickly over her head. It was of buff cotton with a print design of small red and blue triangles to match the suit braiding.

"Fancy that!" said Mrs. Royer. "My! Didn't I tell you?"

The jacket slipped on easily. Flo left the front open, but buttoned the belt.

"What more d'you want?" demanded Mrs. Royer.

Flo slowly turned and walked stiffly and sedately the six paces which the room allowed, then abruptly she swooped back.

"There's shoes, too; I forgot! Brogues."

Also there were two pairs of stockings, but they were black, thick cashmere, so that she did not mention them because she thought that she looked better in her own which were grey cotton.

"My word," repeated Mrs. Royer, "I never thought they'd do you like that. When Missis told me, I thought it 'ud be somethin' not worth having."

"I bet Ivy'll be jealous," said Flo.

She looked down at herself in front and tried to look over her shoulder to see what it was like at the back. "It does fit, doesn't it?"

"Like you'd been measured."

"It isn't a bit tight?"

"You look like a real lady," said Mrs. Royer. "Fancy them fitting you up like that. Eh, everybody'll wonder what's happened . . . we've had a fortune or somethin'," and she chuckled and suddenly remembered Mrs. Dower. "You

must come. She won't believe if I just tell her. But if you're *there* . . ."

"You'd have thought they'd have sent a hat," said Flo.

"Yes; haven't they?"

"That's all that came," Flo nodded at the box.

"Eh, but there should be; I remember Missis sayin' . . ." Mrs. Royer felt clumsily among the tissue paper and uttered a triumphant, "Here y'are; fancy missin' that," and she brought from underneath where it had been lying flat, a navy-blue knitted hat something like a turban. It suited Flo; she felt as well dressed as she imagined any queen could feel. She took off its nail the square of pitted glass that was kept by the window, and holding it in both hands, tilted her head first one way then the other to see how she would appear to passers-by on either side.

"Now, you *do* look a little lady," said her mother gushingly. "You see, but for me you'd have missed it. Suppose it had been thrown away . . ."

"Oh, I wouldn't have done that!" exclaimed Flo. "Isn't it . . .," she didn't want to say "natty" again, because she had already used it three times, therefore she ended with "neat?"

"It might have growed on you, it's that much as it should be," agreed her mother. "Let me try."

But on her round skull with streaky hair hanging all round like cobwebs the turban made her look "like nothin' on earth", as she said, and she dragged it off and gave it back. "It don't look like the same when you have it on," she said, quite relieved that she had not spoilt it. "My word, what'll Mrs. Dower an' Sal Fairburn, an' Old Poll say . . . an' Sarah Ann? Huh, it was Sarah as told me as I'd no right to send you away. Let me get my things on."

She bustled to the door and plucked her hat and coat off the nail as if there were a fire and she had to escape.

"What, keep them on and go with you?" asked Flo. "I . . . I'm not washed or anything."

"Who'll know with you with them things on?" demanded Mrs. Royer, leading to the front door.

Flo followed, hesitant yet thrilled; and the daffodils forgotten in the firelight, seemed to shake their heads.

Chapter 2

ON Sunday morning Flo was taken to the Vicarage where Mrs. Royer worked. There was a cook, who was also supposed to be general, but she never touched any job that was dirty or tiring. Ivy and Flo had told their mother that she ought to leave, only she had been going there for twenty-two years last February 28, a date easy to remember, so that it was foolish even to expect her to leave. All Saturday night Flo had been happy, standing to be admired and stroked by her mother's friends, listening to exclamations and questions, and aware of jealousy when there were others of about her own age present. But now she felt different.

"Is Missis up?" asked Mrs. Royer as soon as she had got her head and first foot across the back doorstep.

"Up? Of course," snapped Mrs. Worthing, six feet two, little more than a skeleton. It was one of her grumbles that Mrs. Royer should be allowed to get there at nine on Sundays instead of at eight. "She's been up half an hour."

"Here's our Flo," said Mrs. Royer, quite deaf to the antagonism. "What d'you think of her? Isn't she a stunner?"

The inspection was made with a widening of the lower part of Mrs. Worthing's nostrils, the wings of which had a curious flexibility that let her make a sneer her most artistic accomplishment.

"Where did she get them?" she asked.

"Missis got 'em," Mrs. Royer answered, enjoying her moment.

"Whatever for?"

"To go to job as she's got her; that as I told you of, and as you said wouldn't be no good."

"And if she's got to be dolled up for it like that, it won't be no good. If she was any girl of mine, I'd send them back and tell them I can dress my own daughter without any of their charity."

Mrs. Worthing turned away and clanged the iron frying-pan on the gas-stove.

"It isn't charity; she's going to pay for 'em," said Mrs. Royer determinedly. "Where's Missis?"

"There's all the washing-up waiting," Mrs. Worthing stated coldly, now ignoring Flo. "Missis'll have no time to waste. It's a special service . . ."

"She'll be in the breakfast-room, is she?"

Mrs. Royer accepted cook's silence as "Yes", and told Flo to wait. She came back five minutes later and told Flo to follow. They went through the hall which was overcrowded with a Victorian hatstand, a mahogany table with a marble top, and a much-carved black oak chest. There was a smell of dust. The breakfast-room was on the right. The vicar's wife was at the far side of the fireplace sitting very upright in a maroon silk dressing-gown decorated with large scroll pattern in white. Her plentiful auburn hair was done loosely, chiefly towards the front, so that it helped to increase her appearance of height, and Flo felt small, as if she were going up to someone on a dais.

"Oh, now, Miss Royer, you do look smart," Mrs. Howell greeted her. "No wonder your mother feels proud; indeed, anyone could be proud of you; you might even be taken for a . . ." she was going to say "bishop's daughter", but realized just in time how demeaning that would be to the bishop; therefore she finished by saying "a police inspector's daughter". Fortunately Mrs. Royer was thinking too much of Flo, and Flo was thinking too much of Mrs. Howell, for either of them to notice the hesitation or to wonder why in the world the police had been dragged in. The awkward moment passed very satisfactorily, Mrs. Howell thought, and she went on in a loud, elaborate manner: "Go over there, my dear, in the light. Oh, wouldn't she make a picture, Mrs. Royer? If only I had time to paint her." Mrs. Howell raised her large, rather coarse hands in a gesture meant to indicate the extreme of regret, and then waved for Flo to come closer. "Let me feel the material, dear; I don't want you to have to pay for poor stuff, you know."

She picked up the hem of the skirt and tested its thickness and strength while Flo stood uncomfortable and stiff like a child.

"She's vests an' everything," said Mrs. Royer.

At once Mrs. Howell lifted the petticoat and exclaimed how beautiful Flo's underclothes were, and how beautiful her shoes

were, and then told her to stand away again and went on about how beautiful her hat was. "Artistic, don't you think, Mrs. Royer? Sets her off so; she has features just perfect for a vignette."

Flo had never listened to such a gush.

"Oh, I'm so glad you were wise and decided to take advantage of the scheme," Mrs. Howell went on. "And I'm sure you ought to feel very happy, Miss Royer; happy and grateful."

Flo murmured that she did.

"Of course, you must be good and always do your best, and think of your mother and try to be a credit to her, dear. And remember that I recommended you, which, of course, means that the Vicar is interested. You wouldn't let him down, I'm sure. You must be a little credit to us all," and Mrs. Howell smiled benignantly, not directly at Flo, but over her head. It was as though she were addressing a class. "Of course, you mustn't expect everything to be easy; it isn't for any of us; we all have our trials, even your mother here, I know . . ."

"I do," said Mrs. Royer solemnly, thinking of cook.

". . . but you know what trials are for. They are sent to test and try us; and according to how we meet our trials, so we are rewarded. You know what it says in the Bible . . ."

But Flo wasn't listening. She wished that Mrs. Howell would let her go. She felt so helpless; as if she had done something wrong already and was being reprimanded. Suppose that her new mistress were to turn out to be like this.

"You will be a long way away, but that will be all the better," Mrs. Howell was now saying. "You won't always be able to run home when something goes wrong, and so you'll learn to depend on yourself, and that is what we all have to do, isn't it, Mrs. Royer?"

Taken by surprise Mrs. Royer nodded vigorously and spasmodically clasped her hands, holding on to herself as it were. As Mrs. Howell went on the thought came to Mrs. Royer that what had been said wasn't quite right about the Vicar, at any rate, because he certainly depended on his wife. "Blow 'is nose for 'im, if she could, she would." And Mrs. Royer smiled without knowing.

Mrs. Howell did not notice because she had just become aware that her talk hadn't yet been rounded off as it should be.

"And, of course, my dear, when I say we all must depend on ourselves, you know I mean also that there is an Ever-present Friend to help us." The capital letters were those of a born elocutionist. "Yes, you must never forget your prayers, Miss Royer, promise me that, won't you, and I'll tell the Vicar, and He will pray for you, too."

There was a pause. Mrs. Royer cleared her throat. Flo wondered if she might go. Mrs. Howell wondered whether she had said all that her husband would have liked her to say.

"How do we pay for these 'ere things?" asked Mrs. Royer, self-consciously jerking her thumb at Flo. "That was what I wanted 'er to be told, mum. I'm honest an' I don't want there to be no charity an' no mistakes."

"I'm quite sure you don't, Milly," Mrs. Howell took the opening promptly. "The clothes have been given you, my dear, so that you can go away decently dressed, so you won't feel inferior . . . you've heard of an inferiority complex, of course. Well, that's it. The society have seized on this as the best method of helping you because, although, as the Vicar says, there is nothing degrading in waiting on others . . . it should really be, indeed, of course, it really is, a privilege, to serve . . . but there has unfortunately grown up a . . . a, well, shall we say, a foolish idea that it is demeaning to go out to service. So in order that their girls shall not feel menial, the society have decided . . ."

Flo wondered what "menial" meant. It sounded mean, and the Vicar's wife's talk now made her feel meaner and smaller than before. She glanced to the square bay, but it had been made into an arbour for tall ferns, and grey chinelle curtains kept out most of the rest of the light, so that there was no relief there. When her attention came back, Mrs. Howell was saying:

". . . I know that it may seem to be a long time for a girl to have to go on paying, but it enables her to start right, and a good start is half the battle, as my Husband is always reminding us. And all the six months, of course, she has the privilege of wearing good clothes. Isn't that an awfully good idea don't you think, Miss Royer? But I know you do."

Flo was relieved not to have to answer.

"I suppose, though, mum, that she'll have something just to be going on with?"

"Two shillings a week," said Mrs. Howell very graciously, "and most of that she will be able to save, I expect. You see, with clothes and all her food, what more can she require? It will give her a good opportunity to practise that other great virtue, it will teach her the Value of Thriftiness . . . too much makes us all wasters . . . waste not, want not, you know, my dear," she concluded, turning towards Flo and motioning for her to come closer. "Let me give you a kiss, dear, and be sure, if there is any way in which you think the Vicar or I may help you, that we shall be perfectly happy to do it, won't we, Mrs. Royer?"

"I'm sure, mum. You always does."

Then came the kiss. Mrs. Howell's lips were thick and soft and rather surprisingly warm and seemed to leave a wet blob on Flo's cheek, so that she felt that she wanted to mop it at once.

"It was so thoughtful and kind of you to bring her to see me before sending her away," Mrs. Howell called after them. "Don't forget to close the door behind you, Milly."

Mrs. Royer obediently shut it.

"The stuck-up frump," said Flo. "I . . ."

"Ssh," interrupted her mother urgently. "She's very good, she is, an' as she says, you ought to be . . . er, you ought to do as she's told you. But for her you wouldn't have all them things."

"Way she talked, she might be giving them . . ."

"Don't let cook hear," Mrs. Royer broke in, following her through the heavy lobby door. "I bet she's wonderin'. She'll be trying to find out all day," and a chuckle in the gloom of the back passage told Flo that her mother would be happy for the rest of the morning, anyway.

Chapter 3

SUNDAY afternoon and evening passed quickly. So well did Flo's things suit her that everybody that knew her responded at once with open, pleased admiration, or ill-hidden

jealousy, both of which Flo could enjoy. The feelings of meanness and littleness of the morning she escaped from. Most jealous of all was Ivy, who, of course, had to try everything. Ivy had a natural grace which let her look well in almost anything; Flo was somewhat stumpy and generally hard to suit. But for once the navy blue costume was too stiff and sober for Ivy's untidy beauty, though exactly right for the more staid Flo.

"Well, if you don't land a feller in that, you're a wet hen," said Ivy. "I bet I wouldn't be long skivvying, anyway."

She went out again; it was very seldom she told where she was going. Mrs. Royer was gossiping somewhere and Flo went up to pack. Mrs. Howell had given them a travelling bass, one half of which went over the other half in the same way as a soap container does. The halves did not fit tightly, so that clothes could be stacked right up out of the lower portion and the upper half became a very deep lid. It should have been strapped, only Mrs. Howell had kept the straps thinking that they might still be useful, and Flo was going to have to manage with old rope. It was rather a relief after her many visits to be left alone to pack, because she wanted to decide carefully about things. She had begun to realize that it might be a year before she came back. All the things that she knew she wanted and all the things that she might take were put on the bed. Into the bottom of the bass at once went the spare new underclothes. The choice of other clothes was difficult, not because there were so many to choose among, but because by contrast she saw how shabby the other things were. Most of them were Ivy's cast-offs, Ivy always having been in work of some sort, while Flo had only had one job since school, three months of office cleaning for the Thistle Trust Limited. Then even more difficult were decisions over intrinsically worthless possessions, which nevertheless were to Flo most valuable. A hand-mirror encrusted with queer shells that her mother had brought from Morecambe from a Mothers' Meeting trip had as a rival a rounder mirror in which she could see herself much better, but which had only a plain wood back. The Bible which she knew that she ought to take got left behind because she felt that "Sir Gibbie" and "Peg o' my Heart" would really be

better company. A photograph taken at the age of three went into the bass, while another more recent which showed Ivy as well was thrown out because Flo considered that Ivy looked more intelligent on it than herself. Into the bass, too, went a blood-streaked pebble, somewhat resembling a heart, found at Walney Island on the same day that she picked up a sixpenny bit. Afterwards she had carried the stone everywhere for three weeks hoping that it would give more luck, though it hadn't. Now, however, she felt that she ought to try it again. She had an uneasy fear that even if it didn't give good luck, it might, if left behind, cause bad luck. Beside the stone went a green glass pig half an inch long with three legs and no tail. This pig had a mate with only two legs and no tail, but after considerable thought that one she left to look after her mother. Last of all, in preference to a morocco pocket-wallet of her father's, a pair of opera glasses of his went into the bass. They were plain, and had never been in a theatre, though the black enamel had been worn off the yellow metal of the frames of the lenses, and one of the barrels was rust-pitted from much use in all weathers. Flo remembered how her father had always carried them in his left trouser pocket, and how he had brought them out and let her toy with them very occasionally when she was very young. But he had always been so careful to see that they did not get dropped that the whole family had grown up with the impression that they were valuable; and when he died suddenly of pneumonia in the late spring when Flo was six, the glasses had been carefully put away in the polished walnut box which was one of Milly Royer's few maidenhood treasures. Flo, of course, had not known this, but one day in the last year of her schooling, she had been attracted by the round eye of mother-of-pearl let into the box lid and had found the glasses and had taken them out. By that time her mother had grown careless, and when she saw her with them she merely tried to recall where they had been put, and then forgot them again. But Flo had remembered how her father once had taken her to Walney and let her look at a yacht far out, with the sun on its white sails. On deck there had been a woman in a poppy jumper, and the sun had enriched her hair to gold; and Flo, seeing all this with unexpected intimacy, in the enclosed field of the lenses, had

suddenly felt a romantic thrill. How lucky the woman was, how good it must be to be out there, she thought, and then knew envy. The picture was in her memory never to be forgotten, and how often she had prayed to be able to have a husband who would give her a yacht like that, or how many times she had day-dreamed of herself on a yacht, she could not have told. As she handled the glasses now, the thought strayed into her mind that the way the youth had been lying on the deck of the unfinished submarine was exactly how she would lie on the deck of "her" yacht. She laughed lightly at that, and put the glasses in without hesitation. She had been told that her father had wasted a lot of time uselessly staring through the glasses at ships when he might have been working, but what did that matter? She thought that it was a good thing to have done.

So now everything was in the bass. She tested the weight, but it wasn't very heavy, after all. The tying could be left, for there was sure to be something that she had forgotten. She went down and sat by the fire which was nearly out because the half hundredweight of coal was nearly gone and would have to last till Monday. At eleven Mrs. Royer came in with three-pennyworth of chips, which they shared, eating them straight from the newspaper. Flo liked them except for the grease that clogged her fingers.

"Wonder if there'll be a chip-shop where you're goin'?" Mrs. Royer murmured, indifferent after a gossip day. She wiped her fingers on her skirt down her thigh, feeling too indolent to reach to her stockings.

Flo without thinking rinsed when she went to run more water into the kettle.

"To-morrer night, where will you be?"

"I don't know," said Flo; after that they scarcely spoke till they were both about to get into bed. Flo, though usually she slept by the window, asked if she could be in the middle.

"Warmest place, but I'll give it to you . . .," said her mother, resigned. Nevertheless, she was asleep in less than ten minutes, and began a series of little snoring bouts; she would snore louder and louder, and then unexpectedly her whole body would jerk and the snores would end abruptly, though only to begin within a minute or two and work up

to the climax once more. Flo had known of this previously, but she had never realized how regular and peculiar it was; and the next night there would be no more of this snoring and twitching going on beside her. This was the end of their intimacy. She lay and stared at the blank of gloom that was the ceiling and wondered whether even yet she might draw back; announce firmly in the morning that she was not going to go away. Why should she?

At half-past eleven Ivy came in, but idled about downstairs till after midnight. She came up with a candle carelessly held so that grease dripped and congealed in long icicles. She noticed the bass and Flo's costume ready over the cane chair.

"Lucky devil . . . wish it was me," she said gruffly, seeing Flo open-eyed.

Mrs. Royer jerked into silence but did not wake.

"I'd sooner stay," said Flo.

"Don't be a wet hen. What is there in this hole?" asked Ivy, pulling things off and dropping them anywhere round the bed foot. "Anywhere'd be better than here. God, if I got half a chance . . ."

She flopped into bed and curled her back so that Flo felt her notched spine.

"What's up; had a row with Charlie?" Flo asked gently.

"The squirt!" and Ivy lay loggishly and would say no more.

Flo, touched by her companions' warmth, was aware of their utter indifference. On the bare wood floor the alarm clock ticked harshly and busily, keeping to its job in the manner of a businessman with no time to waste. Above the roofs the periodic boom of the Town Hall clock told of the new day's coming. Flo, too unsettled inside herself to sleep, dozed fitfully. Then the grating running of the first tram along Duke Street, a hundred yards eastward, told that day was begun—five o'clock. The alarm burst so suddenly into its crow that Flo, who had been waiting expectant, started spasmodically; the others lay on unmoving. The clock set off on its ticking job again, as if nothing had happened, and the steady snoring crescendo started towards yet another climax.

"Time," said Flo, putting her hand on Ivy's shoulder.

And it was as if the smooth skin there was magnetic. The hand closed; and after the hand the body was drawn, so that for a moment they lay close incurved together. "The last time," whispered Flo in a sudden access of love.

Ivy stirred, came out of the depth of sleep slowly and stretched. She was still doped and muttered, "'As it gone?" and then shrugged, as if at last becoming aware of herself, breaking the warm contact of the embrace with unknowing callousness. Flo shrank back, rebuffed, and felt her sister lift herself and shake her head as a dog does. Ivy swung half of the curtain back and the inflow of pale light set going the clockwork of Mrs. Royer's day habits; her snores abruptly stopped as if she had been clutched at the throat, she moaned and almost at once rolled on her right side and out from under the clothes, landing on the floor with a clumsy squirming action. Then she picked up the first of her things that she saw: an odd stocking, her grey woollen petticoat, her black working apron, and rolled them into a bundle and lurched off down the narrow stairs. Almost invariably she went without something and had to come back. Flo had tried to get her to be more tidy so that she might save this extra journey, but this morning it should give them a last moment together. Ivy went down with a, "Well, so long, Flo; an' look out for yourself", and Flo waited. But her mother did not come. Ivy banged the door and went running as usual towards the tram. Flo heard the pots as her mother pushed them from her. She slid from bed and went down as she was. Mrs. Royer was pinning on the black hat with the mangy ostrich feather which Mrs. Howell had passed on. She slewed a little leftwards from the glass.

"When shall I see you again, mother?"

"I got to go; you know what cook'll say," broke in Mrs. Royer, flustered and uncomfortable. "It'll all be for the best; you 'member what missis said . . ."

"What about . . . praying or paying?"

Only her mother was in the doorway, and suddenly poked her mouth towards her. On the elder woman's lips was the warm sweetness of tea from the last hurried sup, and this was the taste left with Flo. For several seconds she watched her mother's hobbling rush and the swing of her black American

cloth bag on its worn string. Then the grin of the paper boy interrupted. Slamming the door, Flo clutched her pink flannel nightdress and stumbled upstairs.

Chapter 4

AFTER that sorrow was forgotten in hurry. The train left at 8.10. At first the journey was an excitement; Flo had been as far as Lancaster once before with her mother on another Women's Meeting trip and had enjoyed it, and was prepared to try to enjoy the ride again. The sun shone and there was a thrill to be had from the occasional glimpses southward of the beautiful calm on the bay. Also she was proud. She felt like a lady, the equal of anyone; in fact, superior to a girl in the opposite corner who had on a stained grey tweed coat and whose left stocking had a nine-inch ladder from the knee. This girl continually twisted a dark green handkerchief, and at the first stop asked anxiously if it was Carnforth.

"No," said Flo. "We're a long way yet."

"Are you goin' there?" asked the girl, appealing with sandy-brown eyes.

"Yes, and a lot farther . . . to Derbyshire. I have to change at Carnforth."

"Oo, then I'll be all right."

"Have you got friends there?" asked Flo, feeling polite.

"No; I'm going to service. I wish they were friends. I don't know 'em."

Flo should have said, "Oh, you'll be all right", only she couldn't. She stared out of the window, superiority forgotten, and wondered why she couldn't have been given a place at Carnforth. She was tempted to tell that she was going into service, too, but she mastered that.

"D'you like travellin'?" I don't," said the girl.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Flo, and felt better.

At Carnforth the girl got out first and waited and seemed to expect Flo to show her how to get off the station and how to get to the address which she had on a smudged envelope. Flo pointed hurriedly in the general direction of the exit,

which she only vaguely remembered, and told her she could do no more because of the next train that she had to catch. The girl all at once seemed to shrink into herself, as an affectionate puppy does when unexpectedly scolded. Flo felt contrite and said, "Come on", and hustled along with the crowd. The girl followed obediently as close as she could.

There was a policeman just past the barrier. "Ask him, then you'll be all right," said Flo.

The girl said, "Shall I?"

"Show your ticket," said Flo.

The girl went fumbling through, too worried to thank her. After that there was twenty minutes to wait. Flo got a seat by a fat woman in brown who had her feet under a big bundle done up in a grey blanket.

"I wish I had one o' them," said the woman at once, looking at Flo's bass.

"I've a job to carry it," said Flo, who also had an umbrella, which was really her mother's, and a handbag which had come from the Vicarage and had been her mother's. "Is this where the Manchester train comes?"

"Ay. You should have straps with a 'andle on. I guess you're goin' into service, are you? Lady's maid, eh?" There was an insult in the fat woman's voice, and Flo wished that she had found someone else.

"I'm going to a farm," said Flo without thought of a denial.

"Huh, all work an' no play; *band* all the mucky work," was the pitying comment. "I've 'ad some. Where're you goin'?"

"Derbyshire."

"Muckiest lot o' farms in creation; *band* a mangy stingy lot as works 'em." The woman drew vigorously up her nose and swallowed. "Scrag end o' humanity, that's what I call Derbyshire farmers," she added as if that clinched it. "Too mean to spend breath blowin' their own porridge."

Flo didn't know what to say.

"Never bin on a farm before?" demanded the fat woman.

"No," said Flo uncomfortably.

"God 'elp you," said her questioner, and turned to a thin,

meek-looking woman on her other side and went on : " This 'ere young woman's goin' on a farm in Derbyshire. She's goin' to learn summat, isn't she ? " The meek woman blinked in a way apparently meant to indicate agreement. " Where exac'yly did you say it were ? " asked the fat woman, turning back.

" I didn't say at all," said Flo, wondering whether to get up and go.

" Oh, didn't you ; then you'd better tell me now."

" Why should I ? " asked Flo reddening, remembering Mrs. Mawson's advice.

" Eh, please yourself," said the fat woman, "*hand* I'll please myself. On'y probab'ly I could give you a few home truths." She chuckled in a very knowing way. " There's none many as I don't know if it's anywhere round Moss."

Flo was so surprised that at once without thinking she exclaimed, " Why, that's just where it is . . . Mossd-y-c-h-e," spelling it out, " near Moss. Nadin's."

" Eh-oh ! " The fat woman clapped her right hand over her knee as though applauding herself. " You're goin' to Peppery Monica's. She'll teach you summat, *hand* see that you don't get rusty through doin' nowt." She chuckled, this time with real amusement. " Talk the back leg off a hoss, Monica can, when she gets goin' . . . and don't take much gettin' goin' neither. What made you go there ? "

" I didn't know," Flo murmured.

" Didn't know, hah ! " The fat woman laughed loudly. " Peppery Monica . . . five foot two an' nowt to look at . . . but I'd back 'er to 'old 'er own agen Goliath." She poked at the meek woman with her elbow. " Did you 'ear what she says ? You know Monica . . . at Prettyfields ? 'Er as is wed to . . . "

" I think the train's coming," interrupted the meek woman, looking over her glasses up the platform.

" Eh, by gum ! " ejaculated the fat woman. Instantly she dug podgy hands into the top of her bundle, hoisted it to her hip and waddled forward. The bundle collided heavily with a porter who was looking the other way. He turned angrily. " D'you want all the ruddy platform ? " promptly demanded the fat woman.

"Not much ruddy hope if I do," the man retorted, his frown changing slowly to a grin, though as it were unwillingly.

"If you're a gentleman, open th' door," said the fat woman.

The porter trudged round and tugged at the first one he came to. "You'll take all the carriage wi' that; what're you goin' to do with it?" he asked.

"Hang it on the knob," was the quick reply; and at once the woman tried to butt the bundle through the door. It stuck and she leaned against it. "'Ere, you, give a shove."

She let go and the bundle stuck where it was. The porter gave a shove and then put his shoulder to it. "What the hell did you put it in this way for?" he demanded, and began to tug to get the bundle out again. The fat woman lugged, too, and the meek woman looked over her spectacles. Flo, who had followed them, suddenly realized that she needn't get into their carriage, and that in fact she didn't want to, but they were going to Manchester and might be useful to her there. So she made to get into the next carriage nearer to the engine.

"'Ere, you, there's room in 'ere," said the voice from behind that she already knew well. "You'll be gettin' lost if you've never been to Manchester."

The fat woman, who was now leaving it all to the porter, looked at Flo in a possessive way. Flo felt caught.

"Why the hell didn't you leave it at the laundry?" panted the porter as he struggled to turn the bundle in his arms and get it through sideways. It went in suddenly, so that he sprawled in after it over the step.

"You'll want goin' to the laundry yourself if you dust the floor wi' your waistcoat that way," said the fat woman.

He dumped the bundle in the far right-hand corner. When he turned to get out he was obstructed by the fat woman who was helping Flo with her bass.

"You should 'a had a train of your own," was his comment as he pushed backward into the corridor and turned to get out through the next compartment. The fat woman tugged the corridor door shut after him. Flo was wondering whether she could put the bass on the rack when the fat woman took it off her and planted it on the seat opposite to the bundle.

"If they see all th' luggage as we've got, nobody'll push in;

I like a bit o' room," said the fat woman, and her meek companion waited while she plumped in the seat by the platform window with her back to the engine, and while Flo on the fat woman's nod took the opposite window seat. The meek woman then selected a place by Flo, explaining carefully that she always found it better to face the way the train was going. "You like to see where you're goin'; I like to see where I've bin," said the fat woman, placing one podgy hand on the other comfortably on the round of her stomach.

Flo felt that the ride was going to be spoilt. Little as she had travelled by train she had always liked it. She found it fascinating to glide along through strange country, past strange houses, getting intimate peeps through back windows, down strange streets, seeing life going on calmly without one, as it were; it was like watching a film, and a film that to her was more interesting and satisfying than those she had seen in cinemas. She settled, staring steadily through the window, hoping that her companions would leave her alone. The guard's whistle shrilled; someone shouted urgently "Get in!" The porter who had been standing idle close by suddenly rushed at the door and dragged it open with a "'Ere y'are. Plenty o' room 'ere", and in came in a flurry a young woman with a hat-box of black patent leather with scarlet edging.

"By gum, that were a near do," said the fat woman, staring her over.

The newcomer seemed inclined to go through into the corridor, but hesitated on seeing the obstruction of the bundle and bass.

"You'll be all right in 'ere," said the fat woman, taking possession of her, too. "Are you goin' to Manchester?"

The young woman said "Yes" clearly, as if she knew how to look after herself. "I was seeing my luggage in; that's what delayed me."

"I always keep mine." The fat woman nodded diagonally at her bundle. "I'm havin' none o' my stuff put off at the wrong shop. Where I get off, that's where my luggage gets off. Sally, there, were once goin' to Brummagen an' couldn't find 'er luggage quick enough an' got it took to London, didn't you Sal?"

The meek woman said, "I did, but it wasn't my fault," and appeared to be going to explain why it wasn't, only her companion went on :

"You'd look well landin' in Manchester wi' nothing but a new hat . . . I suppose that's what you've got."

The newcomer said that it was. The train slid from under the gloomy station canopy and in the new white light Flo saw that the young woman was made up to a doll-like white and pink with ruby lips. The collar of her long grey coat was cream fur on which her hair rested in golden spring-like curls. The neck of her blouse, which was pink neatly sprigged with tiny daisies, went down in a deep "V".

Flo, who had been so satisfied with herself before, at once felt the contrast. Why hadn't they let her have a fur? Why was her hair so dull and straight? And she wished she had this young woman's confidence, for she showed no sign of being flustered over nearly missing the train; she continued to answer her questioner evenly and pleasantly.

"What are you going to Manchester for?" asked the fat woman. "She's goin' to a farm, *hand* I've told 'er as she doesn't know what she's lettin' herself in for."

"I shouldn't think she does," said the woman with the curls, smiling with very blue eyes at Flo.

"I can tell you're not goin' to Manchester for that, anyway," the fat woman went on. "You're in a shop, I should think, aren't you?"

"I'm travelling."

"What for, hats?"

"No; moving on."

"Moving on; what for?"

"She doesn't want to tell you," put in the meek woman with a suggestion of surprise, though it might however have been her most daring effort at reproof.

"What she doesn't want to tell, I don't want to know," and the fat woman turned her bland greeny-grey stare at Flo again.

Almost without pause she went on : "I'll tell you before you get there who wears th' breeches at Prettyfield, an' that isn't Emmott. No bigger than two-three penn'orth of copper she isn't, an' 'e's six foot summat . . . like a telegraph pole.

wi'out wires . . . and he daren't open his mouth when she shoos him." The fat woman laughed loudly, ha-ha, and looked through the window as if she owned the landscape and just wanted to assure herself that it was there.

Flo felt confused before the newcomer. She had taken from her patent-leather handbag a neat oblong mirror and was finnickingly touching her curls into place with long fingers.

"You're not a hairdresser, are you?" asked the fat woman, abruptly changing again the direction of her attack.

"No," replied the other at once. "I wish I was; what profits they must make!"

"They don't make owt out o' me; nor out o' Sal," said the questioner as if what they might make out of others didn't matter. "Them as want to go to them can afford to pay . . . if they're soft enough."

Without replying the young woman went on looking at herself. For the moment she appeared to be oblivious of them. The fat woman frowned, looked as if she were about to speak; then gave it up and stared out of the window again. The train's motion joggled her breasts in the loose front of her cheap black dress. All at once she turned on the meek woman. "Where was it you buried your Jim?"

"Pendlebury,"

"Ah!" and she was silent once more, though only for thirty seconds. "'Is name's Emmott, an' Monica were a Borden before 'e wed 'er," she informed Flo, thinking it out slowly. "'E come from Hayfield way, but Monica's an old Mossite . . . me an' 'er went to school together. Ask 'er if she remembers Hilda Evans, that's me as was . . . I'm married now, an' have been . . . Collin's my name."

Having failed to get the information she wanted out of the young woman, the fat woman now seemed determined to give them a complete tale of her own life. Flo looked out and saw houses and felt the train slowing down.

"Preston," announced Mrs. Collin. "We stop 'ere and I think I'll get a cup of tea."

As they ran along the platform she let the window down and laboriously pushed the upper part of herself through, blocking everything as completely as a blind. The tea

refreshed her, and as soon as the train started again she returned to attack. "You didn't tell me what you was," she said, staring diagonally across.

"I'm in the profession," said the young woman unexpectedly, and with a certain dignity.

"Eh?" exclaimed Mrs. Collin as if she had not heard right.

"In the profession," repeated the other with added clearness.

"Oh." Mrs. Collin looked interrogatively at her friend.

"She says she's in the profession," explained the meek woman carefully, her manner somehow suggesting that she would have preferred to have given a nudge with her elbow and have whispered something more concise. Flo, too, wondered what the young woman could mean and the young woman laughed tinklingly, showing big, very white, very regular teeth. Mrs. Collin appeared to be thinking it out; she seemed to suspect that she was being made fun of, but nearly a minute joggled past before she asked rather sombrely:

"What profession do you mean?"

"*The* profession; there's only one profession, surely," said the young woman, smiling now, though in a more superior way.

"There's dozens as I knows of," said the fat woman, scarcely disguising disgust. "There's dentists an' doctors an' architects an' chemists," taking a deep breath, "*hand* druggists an' 'erbalists an' bone doctors an' horse doctors an' . . . and . . ."

"Chiropodists," put in her meek friend helpfully.

" . . . *hand* chiropodists an' professors an' . . . hundreds of 'em."

"But only one profession; *the* profession," repeated the young woman, moving her head confidently so that her curls seemed to nod agreement.

"She means she's on the stage," the meek woman abruptly informed her companion in a very loud whisper across the carriage.

"Then why didn't she say so?" demanded Mrs. Collin, apparently not at all surprised by this information.

The meek woman did not reply. Flo had been to the pictures many times, but to the theatre only twice; and this

was the first actress that she was aware of having seen off the stage. The young woman was obviously proud of her job, and her smartness and self-confidence impressed Flo again. She smiled back at Flo in an open intimate way, as if she guessed that she was being envied. But there was no envy in Mrs. Collin's tone when she shot out her next question :

"Huh, you'll be a dancer, eh?"

"No; a singer."

"Oh, in the chorus. . . . I see." Mrs. Collin nodded, staring at the young woman all over again, and then added another significant, "I see", though what she could see Flo could not guess.

"It's a very interesting life," said the young woman. "I'm playing on the same bill this week as Gertain Van Blogh . . . you see things and get to know the real people."

"I bet you do," agreed Mrs. Collin. "I suppose you get to know the men better than th' women."

"Not necessarily; though I'll say some of them are a bit temperamental . . . think too much of themselves by a bit. But, gee, it's up to them. When I become a star . . ." She laughed again, very prettily, Flo thought. Flo could imagine her in dark brown satin alone in the footlights laughing in just that way and swinging her golden curls.

"They don't pay you much on that job; how d'you make enough to live?" demanded Mrs. Collin, entirely unimpressed.

"Oh, we manage all right," said the young woman easily. "But, of course, if I could marry a prince, I'd take him."

"I bet you would . . . *hand* quick; but you're more like to end up in th' lock 'ouse."

Flo supposed that she meant the workhouse. The young woman took no notice; in fact, she beamed and seemed still to be thinking of how she might marry a prince; and Flo thought that that was what was much more likely to happen to her. But the mention of the lock house was Mrs. Collin's final word. She sat with her hands on the bulge of her stomach apparently brooding. The young woman turned to Flo.

"Did she say you were going to a farm?"

"Yes," said Flo.

"D'you like it?" she asked. "Ugh, it's the last thing, the very last, that I'd like. I couldn't stick it, I simply couldn't."

I don't suppose that you ever go to the theatre, but if you get the chance you should come and see our show. Gertain's fine, if she is a bit stuck up. I wish I had her voice and figure. Can she show herself? Oh gee!"

The young woman had a bubbling sort of enthusiasm and seemed glad of a listener like Flo. The meek woman stared straight to her front and did not seem to mind being talked across, simply taking no notice. Mrs. Collin seemed to have forgotten about everybody but herself.

"How long will you be in Manchester?" asked Flo.

"Oh, only a fortnight; a mouldy hole. Then we go on to the Potteries . . . Hanley Hip. The manager there, he's a beaut; if they were all like him . . .!"

She laughed once more and began to search in her handbag and brought out a Goldflake packet and lit a cigarette with a match snipped out of a flat, green booklet. Leaning back she used the opposite seat as a footrest, carelessly crossing legs bare of stockings. Mrs. Collin turned a little to stare.

"You deserve your death," she declared solemnly. "Wait till you're my age an' you'll be as stiff as a clothes-horse wi' rheumatics."

"Don't worry, I'll be dead by then," said the young woman pertly. "A merry life and a quick one, that's me. I want to die young."

"You'll manage it, I should think," said Mrs. Collin. "If you'd 'ad to work, like what I have, you'd take more care."

"Olive oil's the best thing for rheumatics," the meek woman put in unexpectedly. "Rub it in night an' mornin', well into the joints."

"Emmott Nadin 'as it," said Mrs. Collin looking informatively at Flo. "Most farmers 'as it, and serve 'em right, th' skinny beggars. It's non a thing as they die of, but it gives them a bit o' hell before they gets there." Mrs. Collin thrust her tongue along her teeth beneath her thick upper lip as if savouring her own remark. "Not as 'e's as bad as Pepp'ry Monica . . . it's her as should have rheumatics, *hand* a few other things. Mean . . . she'd squeeze a penny till it squealed."

Flo had never heard this before. She felt inclined to laugh.

"If there's one sort of person I can't stick, it's the mean

sort," said the young woman. "Thank Heaven you don't get many in our line. We mayn't get much, most of us, but we enjoy it."

The meek woman somehow by her look indicated that she didn't believe this. Mrs. Collin said succinctly, "There's enj'yment *hand* enj'yment", but Flo wished that she were going to Manchester to go on the stage instead of having to face the strange couple that the fat woman seemed to despise so. Glancing aside Flo saw sliding past a dark weed-grown pit bank and then starved-looking fields; after the good rolling country between Barrow and Lancaster this country seemed empty and unlovely, and Flo realized how far she was already from home. Then a spired tower came into view, and Mrs. Collin saw it, too, and exclaimed with genuine satisfaction:

"Eh now, there's where you buried yo'r Bert, Sal. Best place for 'im were underground, I always thought."

The meek woman neither nodded nor spoke, though a slightly more distant look seemed to come into her pale mild eyes. Flo forgot her own unhappiness in feeling sorry for her, and as if attracted by some intuition the meek woman turned slowly towards her and perhaps intended to smile, but did not. Instead she spoke: "Soon be in now. D'you know your way?"

The last few minutes of the run were spent with Flo trying to memorize confusing instructions from Mrs. Collin, cut into twice, by the meek woman, on how she should cross from Manchester's Victoria Station to it's London Road Station; and then just as the train began to slow the young woman let her bare legs down from the seat and said:

"Hell, why mess about? I'm taking a taxi . . . come with me."

She said it so matter-of-fact that Flo felt that there was nothing else to do. Mrs. Collin was struggling with the window and did not hear, but the meek woman murmured, "Be careful", though as she did not look at any of them, Flo thought that she must be talking to Mrs. Collin, who was just putting her head out. To the first porter Mrs. Collin shouted, "Eh, you!" but the train slid on unconsideringly. As it slowed, however, another porter began to trot with them. "That!" he exclaimed when he saw the bundle. "I'll need a damn truck."

"Oh, no you don't. I know the trick; I'll never see you agen," said Mrs. Collin peremptorily. "If I can carry it, you can."

She showed him where to grip and helped to hoist the bundle on his back, and then punched and patted at it till it was tugged through the door. Energetically she went after it, evidently bent on never losing sight of it. Her companion murmured "Good morning" very weakly and followed.

"The substance and the shadow," commented the young woman, flicking the end of her cigarette after them. "You stay here, and when a porter comes, see he brings everything."

Flo stood in the doorway and felt lost with all the people moving past. After a minute, however, a porter came and said, "These them?" and before she could answer he picked up the bass and hat-box and set off towards the back of the train. Flo followed and saw by the luggage-van the young woman standing posed, as it were, beside a biggish grey-green very shabby portmanteau stuck all over with partly torn-off labels. The porter hefted everything on to a two-wheeled truck and soon the things were being unloaded into a cream-and-black taxi.

"What'll it cost? I don't think . . ." began Flo nervously, but the young woman interrupted with, "Get in", and handed the porter something which made him say, "Thank you, mum." "Don't worry, I've had a lucky strike," she explained carelessly when they were both in the back seat. "When you're in luck, run it, that's me."

The taxi swayed on to cobbles and began to climb. The driver hooted and swerved rightward into a broad street behind a brilliant red-and-cream tramway car. Flo felt the strange lostness of being in a big unknown city, and only hoped that she had done right in getting in with the young woman. She glanced at her. She had crossed her legs and was leaning back on the green upholstery very nonchalant, as if she were more used to travelling by taxi than by any other means. She seemed to become aware of Flo watching, and suddenly asked: "Have you got a young man?"

"No," said Flo, abrupt, though instantly thinking of the youth on the submarine.

"I have," said her companion, and as Flo was about to

feel envious she went on: "He thinks I'm going to marry him, but I shan't."

"Why not?" asked Flo without trying to hide surprise.

"Oh, Archie, he's not enough of the necessary for my liking. I'm going to marry a prince . . . or a sheik."

"Archie . . . ?" murmured Flo hesitantly.

"Oh, he's just a bit of fun while I've no one else. Dotty on me, too. Do anything . . . kiss my bottom and lick my shoes, sort of thing. But I can't stick his kind. I want somebody like a sheik, to grab me and run off with me . . . a real he-man."

Rounding carmined lips she blew a mouthful of smoke expressively towards the frosted light-disc in the taxi roof.

"I've read of sheiks, but I've never seen one," said Flo, nevertheless thinking that she would prefer a more ordinary person. "I don't think I'd like to be run off with . . ."

"Just to give yourself up to a strong man!" exclaimed the young woman as though she had not heard. "He could take me where he wanted; he could do what he liked."

She went silent, and Flo looked out and saw that they had come to a crossing where there were more tram-lines, and where on the right there was a tremendous building of buff stone, something like Buckingham Palace as she had seen it in a newspaper. "Are you sure we're going right?" she asked anxiously.

"Sure," answered her companion, flicking her cigarette towards the driver, "he's no sheik . . ." Practically all that Flo could see of him was the top of his bowler, which was right on the back of his head, and the ends of his moustache, which were ginger and projected at either side even beyond his hat brim. ". . . he's a walrus," added the young woman. "Only lives in beer instead of water."

She sat up and began to feel in her handbag and brought up a tiny purse. Flo felt uncomfortable and asked how much it would be.

"A sweet nothing to you; same to the walrus; and good-bye to a packet of cigs. for me. Don't worry," the young woman said gaily. "If you come across any sheiks in Derbyshire, let me know. There's not as many of them as I wish to hell

there were." She seemed to find the coins she wanted and then said "Damn!"

Flo couldn't make out what that was for, but suddenly the taxi bounced, and looking out in alarm she saw that they had left the streets and were charging up an incline towards a tremendous arched building of wood and glass.

"London Road," said the young woman.

"The car turned into a gloomy tunnel and stopped. The driver gave his hat a neat tip from the back that sent the peak almost on to his nose, and then opened the door.

"There's only this young lady getting out here. The Oxford for me, please," said Flo's friend very precisely.

"Ho, yus, an' who pays?" demanded the walrus, his moustache ends quivering.

"I do. Put the bass off, but keep the portmanteau and the hat-box."

Flo wished that she could command as easily. She meekly took hold of the rope round the bass and leaned in at the door to say "Thank you."

"That's all right, love. Whenever you see my name on the bills just come in to help the applause, that's all."

"But wha . . . what is your name?"

"Gertie, Gertie Galbraitho . . . Madam Gertie Galbraitho, colorato soprano . . . sounds all right, doesn't it? Look out, top of the bill! Ta-ta, love."

She smiled and waved in a rather regal manner and then abruptly sat back. Flo stared after the taxi, but Gertie did not look. Suddenly remembering that she had her train to find, Flo turned and went forward into the deeper gloom of the inner station. A porter came towing a loaded four-wheel truck. In answer to her hesitant query he shouted "Heh up!" made a pretence of swerving, but very nearly ran the near-side solid wheels over her toes. She saw an inspector with glasses near the tip of his nose, and when she asked him, surprisingly he said, "Here, number nine. Where's your ticket?" In this train, though she walked its full length, all she could find were four persons; two girls who looked as if they were still attending school, a man with grey hair staring into a wide-open *Daily Mail*, and a middle-aged woman in a non-smoking compartment. Flo got in with the woman

and asked if she were right for Moss. The woman said that she should be and looked away. Flo left the bass on the seat just inside and got out again and waited. After about eight minutes a fatherly-looking guard strolled the length of the train apparently to see whether it were worth while starting with such a small load. "Ay, yo're aw reet," he told Flo, and for a moment she wondered what he meant; then it came to her and she smiled, and he smiled back and waited while she got in, and then he shut her safely in. At the first station the woman got up. "How far is it to Moss?" Flo asked hastily.

"I've no idea," said the woman and walked away.

The guard came and turned the handle, and Flo asked him.

"Oh, yo' con have a snooze; Aa'll waken thee." It was the first time that she had been called "thee", and it sounded strange.

After that the train jogged on in a way that suggested that it didn't care whether it got to where it was going or not. At the third station Flo heard doors slamming and saw the girls and the old man slowly climbing the exit stairs. The guard winked as he passed but did not say anything. It came to Flo that he and at least two other men, on the engine, were now engaged solely in looking after her. She felt nervous and amused and important. At the fifth station, which was larger than any of the others, about half-a-dozen passengers shut themselves away elsewhere in the train. Flo had been in it twenty minutes and began to feel anxious once more. But at the next stop the guard sounded surprised and said, "Non yet. Thee settle thisen, wench. We conna get there before we con." This sounded reasonable, so she tried to settle, but she was weary and wished that the journey would end. The train was running through a shallow cutting with gardens on either side and houses beyond, hundreds of houses, and she felt dizzy from watching them slip past. She had never realized that there were so many people and so many homes in . . . well, her first thought was "in the world", but she changed that to "in England". Everyone seemed to get out at the next two stations, and the guard as he went back to his van popped in at the open window a "Non asleep yet?" but went on without waiting for her answer.

Now at last gardens were left behind, and Flo saw across

grey-green fields a range of dark hills. After a bit the train curved towards them and began to climb, puffing and blowing as though it had grown old all at once. At the next station there were woods on either side. It was a very small place, and there seemed to be nothing to stop there for really. The porter asked the guard if he'd "bin to th' dogs lately?" and the guard said no, he'd "summat better ta do wi'" his "brass".

"Wenching, Aa reckon, eh?" said the porter, grinning.

"Nay, tha knows moor abaat that nor me," said the guard.

Flo wondered over "wenching" while the train rumbled into a tunnel. When they ran into light once more she was surprised. It was as if the train had done a bit of mountaineering without her realizing it. They were high on a hill side, and below was a widish valley with the gleamy windings of a river. The opposite flank went up in a long straight rise and the skyline was moorland, nearly black with heather that had not yet begun to bud. Then the train ran past a wide gap in the opposite hill, and through it Flo saw hills beyond hills, as if they had all been dropped haphazard. In the gap was a little town of grey houses with grey-stone roofs, all gathered in the bottom so that she smiled at the thought that they must have tobagganed down. Looked on from above, houses dwarfed by the broad hills, the town looked nearly like a toy place; and it was queer to think of it full of strangers all with interests and friends of their own. Then she noticed that one straggling street came up the hill that the train was on, and the train stopped just past this street, and Flo asked the guard the name of the place.

"Yon's Millgorge; but this 'ere's cawed New Village. Another hour an' yo'll be wheer yo're goin'."

"Another hour!" exclaimed Flo, and he went off with a grin.

For another two stations the train kept along the hill overlooking the long valley. Then the guard said it was "Border Bridge", and that in a minute or two she would be "i' Derbyshire". The line curved south and the engine went slower than ever and puffed more than ever. They were climbing along the side of a smaller, much nicer valley where there were more trees, and in place of the earlier river there was

only a stream. This ran here and there as all young things do, and tumbled over ledges gaily and whitely.

The valley at first was narrow, and at one place there was scarcely room for the line, the stream, a road and a cottage which were all crushed together there. Then the valley began to expand; it was nearly as deep as the first valley, but wider and somehow more homely. After that the line swung in a great curve to the west, and they toiled out on to a high embankment across the entrance to a side valley that ran up into a green corner of hills on the right. Only Flo was more interested by the left side, for between the larch trees on the embankment she caught sight of a lake with trees around. At some distance away on an arm of the lake a farmhouse stood. Then unexpectedly the train ran off the embankment into a cutting and all the valley was hidden. When once more Flo could see into the valley the lake was merely a gleam away to the left. In the valley centre far off so that it looked no bigger than a thimble a dark church tower poked up among trees, and there were the grey houses of another village round it. She wondered idly what the name of it could be, and then she noticed that the train was stopping.

"'Ere tha art, wheer thart gooin'," announced the guard surprisingly jerking open the door.

"Here!" exclaimed Flo, flustered. "I thought you said an hour."

"Well, tha'll be wheer thart gooin' in an hour, and in two hours, winna yo'?" demanded the guard, grinning again. "Wherever tha gets, tha's wheer tha's gooin', or tha wouldna 'a got theer." He leaned in and picked the bass up easily and swung it out. Flo hastily gathered her handbag and umbrella and almost tumbled after the bass. The train shrugged itself together, and went plodding up the long gradient. Flo was left beside her bass with only one other person in sight, the porter, who was waiting by the small stone ticket-collecting office. She waited, too, hoping that he would come and help, but he only lounged and whistled, as if he had all the rest of the day to waste. So she was forced to lug the bass.

Behind the opposite platform a green bank rose with a row of little black pines along the top, regularly spaced like sentinels. From behind the wooden pailings of the platform

up which she was trudging the country seemed to fall away, and there were no houses anywhere. There did not seem to be any reason why a station should be there, and she suddenly wondered if she had been put out at the right place after all. Only there it was on the green-and-black board: MOSS SOUTH. The porter somehow managed to lever himself from against the wall and stood more or less upright, while he held his hand for her ticket. The bass she put down between herself and him, and said :

"Prettyfield . . . I want Prettyfield. Someone was to meet me."

"Oh, ay," said the porter, as if that did not in the least matter. "There's nobody here as Aa knows of."

"Oh," said Flo, wondering what to do. "Then perhaps it's not far."

"Who were goin' ta meet you; were it Emmott, or one of the lads?"

"I don't know; I didn't know there were any . . . any lads."

"Oh ay, two on 'em, Clem an' Bert. Yo' dunna know them then?" The porter's interest grew. He was long and thin-faced with very slow deep brown eyes. His gaze gradually took her all in, and then a smile spread from his eyes downward. "Yo're non going aliving there, art?"

"How do I get there?" she asked, a bit scared of his advancing familiarity.

"Eh, tha'll non lug that thing," he declared, slowly stooping and testing the bass. "Aa suppose they were going ta send the trap. It'll be Clem; it's usually him as drives. 'E's a lazy beggar is Clem . . . but yo'll 'a ta be careful with 'im. Yo're non going there ta work, are yo'?"

"If yo'll tell me the way, I'll go," she said as coolly as she could.

"Oh, ay, Aa'll show yo' that," he promised, not at all put out. "Yo'll have ta look out for Clem if yo're a going a living there," he went on lounging against the building again as though he were going to keep her there. "Bert, t'other brother, he's a boy ta shoot."

"Ta shoot?" said Flo. "You don't mean he wants shooting?"

"Wants shootin'?" repeated the porter with guffaw. "Naow, course he doesna want shootin'. If one of 'em did it ud be Clem."

"But you . . . you said it was the . . . the other one who was a boy to shoot."

"Well, he is. He'd shoot at owt. If Aa had a quid for every rabbit as he's shot—ay, or for every wild duck as 'e's shot—Aa'd be a bloomin' millionaire."

"Oh," said Flo, realizing at last that it was just another of the funny sayings they used which she would have to get used to. As the porter showed no sign of moving she stooped to lift the bass. "You said you'd tell me the way."

"Aa'll show it you; Aa reckon as that's better," he said slowly, at the same time unhurriedly levering himself away from the stonework once more, but not making any offer to help with the bass. "He's a top-notch at shootin' clay-pigeons, and all; he's got some cups for that," he went on as he mooched in front of her through a narrow ticket-hall and out on to a broad stoned level. At the far side was a strong wooden fence of the kind that only railway companies can afford. It was chest high and he leaned his elbows in a way that told her at once that he had leaned there hundreds of times before. Immediately beyond the fence a green slope began and went right down into the valley where the church was among the trees. Instinctively she looked leftward, and saw the gleam of the lake again. Climbing from the church in easy curves was a grey road.

"Yon's 'im," said the porter, by which she gathered that he meant a spider-size trap and horse about a mile away. "He's non hurryin'; he never does. They say as farming's hard work, but by helup . . ." He spat, aiming at a thistle rosette plugged into the bank. "They dunna know what hard work is," he declared gravely.

"Do you have a lot to do?" asked Flo, glad that he seemed to have forgotten his curiosity about her.

"Aa've the whole bloomin' station to look after, any'ow. See at him; it doesna matter two batterdocks whether he's in time for the train, but what's ta happen if Aa'm non 'ere?"

Flo privately thought that the train would have managed all right, except, of course, that there would not have been

anybody to have taken her ticket. "But what do you do between train times?" she asked, rather liking him.

"What do Aa do?" He whistled through top teeth which were yellow and brown and uneven. "What don't Aa do? yo' mean. There's brushin' and scrubbin' and lamps ta clean an' fill, ticket-office ta see to, fires ta make, telephone t' answer, luggage to see to; an' when Aa've done all that lot, mi time's mi own."

"Oh," said Flo. If none of the people she was to mix with was worse than the porter she felt that she would be all right. She let her glance go down the hill once more, and was surprised at how far the trap had come. She could see now something of the man in it. He had his elbows on his knees, the reins held loosely in both hands. His cap was long-peaked and low so that she could not see his face, but his hair looked lightish.

"Yo' want to watch yo'rself wi' Clem; 'e's a blighter," said the porter unexpectedly; and then he went silent again, and all at once she realized that now she was looking on where she was to live for . . . well, she didn't know for how long.

"You never showed me," she reminded suddenly.

"It's over yon," he said pointing rather vaguely towards the lake which from there appeared to be completely surrounded by trees. "Near th' reservoyer; that's where Bert has his ducks."

Chapter 5

THE bay horse was of the serviceable type, half-legged, and the trap matched; it could obviously have been used just as well for carrying milk churns or sacks of flour as for its present purpose. It was black with a single yellow line round the wheel rims, and it was clean. Only Flo did not notice these things, because as the horse plodded up the last of the slope her attention was all on the driver. When the wheels ground on to the flat he lifted his elbows off his knees and threw a single encouraging *click!* to the horse. He appeared to be of medium height; perhaps thirty, though Flo was a poor judge of those older than herself. He tipped his cap brim a bit higher and said to the porter:

"By gum, you look busy."

"You've kept this young lady waiting. What the hell d'you mean by it?" retorted the porter.

The driver looked towards her and then unexpectedly winked. His face was rather small with a tendency to loose skin under the eyes; neither particularly attractive nor repulsive. Flo did not feel that he would mean much to her, though her heart quickened at the thought of having to sit beside him. The horse side-stepped and the trap churned round. She expected the driver to get down, but he simply sat and waited.

"It's a privilege to wait for some folks, sirrie," he said to the porter. "Shove the goods in the back an' look as though you know how."

"Aren't yo' gettin' down to be intraduced . . . or do yo' know 'er?" the porter asked.

"Apparently you've introduced yourself, anyway, you b——r," replied the driver ungraciously. He seemed now deliberately to be avoiding looking at Flo. "Good job I come along, or there's no tellin' what you'd have bin up to."

"An' no tellin' what yo'll be up to on th' road, nother."

"Shove the goods in an' less cackle," and with scarcely a change in his tone the driver added, speaking to somewhere between the two of them: "Here, jump up if you're goin'. Yon man always takes a week to do owt."

The porter with a single heave let the bass topple over the back-board which was tilted at forty-five degrees held by chains. The bass slid in and jammed part way under the seat. Flo stared at the step wondering how she was to reach in her tight skirt; and then suddenly she found the driver leaning towards her, his face on a level, very close, his eyes a very pale blue and rather small, surrounded by short, very nearly white lashes. His look was intent, insolent, and lasted for several seconds before she became aware that his hand was there waiting, too.

"Catch hold," he said softly, intimately, and automatically she obeyed and somehow with her right hand burdened with umbrella and bag hitched her skirt above her knee and put her right foot in the iron hoop. His hand was hard and hot and strong, and his pull quick and rough, so that she stumbled

rather than stepped up and fell against his knee, which was braced unyieldingly, as if she had fallen against a bent bough. Her hat shifted. She could not recover at once because he kept hold of her hand for an appreciable time longer than was needed; and when he let go she dropped on to the seat with a jerk that caused her arm to loosen over her handbag. It slid on to the seat and then on to the floor near the driver's foot. He shoved it towards her with the big, muck-spattered toe of his boot and left it. When she sat up again she felt red and foolish and angry and a bit afraid. The driver chirruped to the horse and the wheels went over. There were no mud boards, and for Flo, who had never been in a trap before, it was strange to have the wheel turning so close beside her, the spokes coming up and going down. The iron tyres crouched, and as the horse stepped off the level everything tipped forward, including the seat which was slippery and the back-rest which suddenly seemed about to push her off. Apprehensively she clutched at her companion's arm, then as quickly jerked her hand away.

"What the hell?" he asked drawlingly. "You'll be startling the horse; getting us thrown out."

"Sorry," she murmured, staring at the animal's undulating back. It was slurring its hooves and occasionally slipped, the trap correspondingly making little forward ducks which made Flo clutch the seat edge.

"What's your name?"

"Miss Royer," she answered, suddenly recalling again Mrs. Mawson's advice about sticking up for herself.

"Come off it . . . I'm Clem. What is it, Sally, Maggie, Jane . . .?" he demanded, tossing the reins and still looking straight ahead.

"Florence," she said reluctantly.

"Not many of them round here," he commented without any particular interest. "Flo for short, I reckon?"

He did not seem to want any reply and she did not give any. The trap went slowly and jerkily down the slope on to a more level stretch. The reins were shaken again and the horse slung its feet and slapped them down in a lazy sort of trot that gave to the trap an uncomfortable forward-and-back rock. Flo felt herself nodding foolishly, but Clem somehow

let the lower part of his body sway while his shoulders, neck and head kept steady. He ignored her now, apparently occupied with thoughts which had no connection with her. This relieved her and she looked round. They were rolling towards the church. The houses gathered below it were all grey, with grey stone roofs. In a way she liked them, though it was strange that they were not brick. Then the trap trundled beneath a bridge with a high round arch cut diagonally through an embankment, and the direction of the road changed so that she saw that they would not go very near to the church after all. The horse stopped its clopping and walked, and the trap was steadier. A man shoving a brush along the gutter said, "How do, Clem," and then rested on his brush to stare after them. They passed between two short rows of houses and then the road ended at a wider road running right and left. The horse without any instruction turned left. Clem let it go at its own pace, which was slow. Next the way began to rise slightly, and the houses on either side were fewer, and soon they were between hedges going along a broad ridge, and the view was extensive and good. In front there was a wide valley narrowing towards its end, which looked about two miles away. It was a moment or two before she realized that, of course, it was the valley up which the train had panted, and she was trying to make out where the line ran when Clem broke in :

"Ever bin away from home before?"

"No," she answered, defensive.

"How old are you?"

She almost answered, "As old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth," but realized in time that that was only childish. So she told him correctly. Unimpressed, he spat over the wheel. After a pause he commented: "You've non had much experience . . . of owt," and his stare was on her knees and on her leg in its new stocking. For a score or so of the horse's leisurely paces he was quiet once more, and she hoped that he had finished. The road was going down again, and through leftward trees she saw the steel-grey of the lake.

"You'll have plenty of chance to learn something here, anyway," he broke in enigmatically. "You're fitted out, aren't you?"

She felt forced to turn, and once more found his small pale eyes close and scrutinizing. She looked away at once and answered uneasily, "Yes."

"If our Dot gets jealous you'll have a hell of a time," he told her, but with a grin in his tone. "She's ginger when she gets on the hop."

"What's her name?" asked Flo.

"What d'you think? Dot an' carry one," he answered, very slightly sarcastic. He was silent again, and Flo saw jutting out just ahead a toy-like, five-sided toll-house. However, before they got to it the horse unguided shambled off the main road leftward. They were in the gullet of a much narrower lane which went down and curved to the right between deep banks topped with crowded hollies, so that at first the lane was really a narrow steeply descending canyon. Then they came out between much lower banks, and Flo saw a lovely spread of country. The lake lay there like a silver bar dropped across the valley. The road went down to a narrow bridge with willows on either side and then climbed, and now on the right she saw a long barn with a grey-green roof with a ridge that sagged and yet looked as strong as rock. Near it was a haystack like a ginger cake with a chunk cut out.

"If Dot gets stuck up an' tries to bully, come to me," said Clem with new intimateness. "I know how to manage her."

Flo liked him better. "Will I have to do farm work?" she asked.

"Depends on Ma, chiefly. If she'll let him the old man'll find you work, dunna worry. He's a b——r for it."

The end of the barn came to the lane, the gable taking the place of the hedge. Immediately past it was a gate, and Flo was surprised and fluttered when the horse turned in and she saw a cobbled square and on the left a house parallel with the barn. It was the house she stared at—her new home. It was all of the grey green-weathered stone, very plain and very solid: door in the centre, a window at either side and three windows above. Clem dropped the reins on the front-board and the horse took them to a wicket gate and slewed slowly round. With nose pointed to the stable he waited, scratching with his left forefoot.

"Here y'are," said Clem, sliding a long leg out of the trap. He was reaching for the bass before she realized that it was time that she got out also. She felt backward awkwardly for the iron step. As soon as the weight was off the trap the horse set off towards the stable.

"You silly old sod, have a drink," shouted Clem, dumping the bass on its end and snatching the near rein smartly. The horse tossed its head and jingled, but turned. Clem slipped the bit and drew the animal's head towards a deep stone trough. It was set in the garden wall, and was a-bubble from a continuous fall gushing from a rustied iron pipe which stuck out of the stonework a foot above the trough rim. The horse held its jowl over the water for a moment, then made to turn away, but Clem shouted, "Whoa! Sup while you've got chance." The horse kept still again with its lower lip just above the brimming surface. Clem began unhooking and the horse stood there stupid and sulky, as if he didn't even know what water was for. At last everything was undone and Clem took the weight of the shafts and shouted, "Get on then, you old sinner," and the horse woke up and clattered eagerly away. It was not till then that Clem seemed to notice Flo still waiting.

"Door's yonder, can't you see it?" he asked in much the same tone as he had used to the horse, the intimateness which had made her like him quite gone.

Flo grasped her bass by the rope and struggled up the short flagged path. The door was dull red and was partly open. She rested the bass and hesitantly knocked. Instantly an irritated voice yelled: "Come in. Dunna stand knocking."

Flo pushed the door and looked up a flagged passage ending at a second door outlined by light penetrating at its cracks.

"In 'ere," the voice ordered from the left, and Flo saw a large kitchen with a very small, round, snub-nosed woman standing facing her from a rag rug in front of a big shining range. "I'm Mrs. Nadin; Peppr'y Monica they call me, them as dunna like pepper."

"Oh," exclaimed Flo, taken aback.

"There doesna seem ta be much pepper abaat thee, any road," Mrs. Nadin commented, turning to stir with a wooden spoon in a two-gallon iron pan, causing to rise strongly a not

unpleasant smell of warm soaked bran and potato peelings. Flo, still holding the bass, stood not knowing what to do.

"Eh, dunna stond theer; shape thysen. Tha hasna come 'ere ta be waited on," exclaimed Mrs. Nadin, abruptly turning back again. "Tha's gotten fine togs. Aa hopes tha's non feart o' work, cos' if tha art tha'll non stay 'ere long. There's enough silly gawps awready."

She bustled to a great stone sink beneath the window that looked into the yard and held a neatly black-leaded kettle under a big brass tap. Flo looked round, wondering what to do. She walked to a chair at the end of a long horse-hair upholstered settee and balanced the bass on it.

"Tha's brought plenty o' truck," she heard the sharp comment behind her. "When I were a lass we had one frock for best an' another to work, an' nowt else, devil's wedding or no. Tek your coat off, an' if yo' dunna know where ta put it, sit on it. I wonder where that long-legged strip o' idleness is?"

She bustled out on to the flags and shouted harshly and penetratingly, "Emmott!" Without waiting she bustled back and the second she saw Flo again broke out into her sharp, truculent sentences.

"What did you say your name was?" Flo parted her lips, only there was no pause into which she could put even so small a reply as that. "If yo' want ta stay, I'll give yo' a bit of advice," went on Mrs. Nadin, apparently without taking breath. "Work hard, keep your mouth shut and your bowels open, an' you'll be all right."

Flo reddened.

"Sit down," came the next staccato order, "sitting's cheap. We winna grumble if yo' wear them through, on'y happen it'll be your backside as'll wear first."

Mrs. Nadin never grinned at her own pleasantries. The chairs were solid with flat seats. Once they had been red stained. This showed between the spokes of the straight backs and on the insides of the legs, but elsewhere they were bare wood. Everything in the kitchen was solid and plain and worn, but the flag floor, uncovered except in front of the fire, was washed to the buff of the stone; the grate black

shone, and its silver rails and bevelled edges were as bright as if new. A broad four-rail bamboo rack was hoisted close to the high ceiling, and three sheets that hung there were a delicious white, neatly folded and ironed. Flo was about to sit when Mrs. Nadin noticed her hat.

"Happen tha's feart we shall pinch it," she said. "But tha'll get tired carryin' it round on your yead, I reckon."

Flo looked hurriedly round and saw seven hooks on a board fastened along the wall to the left of the door. Most of the hooks held bulky loads of old coats topped with shabby hats, but the end one from the door was empty. She took her costume jacket off and hung that there too.

"You'll have our Dot as jealous as a bald flea," said Mrs. Nadin. "Where the hell is that long length o' pump-water?"

At first Flo thought she meant her daughter, but the little woman went energetically out again to the step and yelled carryingly and peremptorily, "Emmott!" Then back once more she came straight to the grate and lifted the kettle without troubling about the hotness of the handle and poured bubbling water into a tea-pot that had been waiting on the grate shelf. The pot was brown and round and matched the little woman perfectly. Flo had chance to study her for several seconds, and she was struck by the puckered smallness of her face, on which her tiny snub nose protruded exactly as the knob did on the tea-pot lid. Then she was talking again in her harsh quick way:

"Shape thysen. There's cups an' saucers in yon cupboard . . . if Emmott doesna come, it's his own loss."

The cupboard built into the wall on the left of the grate had six shelves, all holding great stacks of orderly pots. Flo was surprised at the number. She took pots for three and set them on the bare cream-scrubbed table. Mrs. Nadin came back from across the passage with a plate of currant pasty squares. The pastry was brown and thick, but Flo's teeth broke in easily and it was flaky and delicious. With one elbow on the table and half turned towards the fire Mrs. Nadin sat opposite. Her feet did not touch the floor. She chewed quickly, her lower jaw working a little sideways as a sheep's does at its cud; she chewed always on the left side as if it was only there that she had teeth.

"What done they call you?" she asked without warning.
"Who the heck did they call you that after?"

"My mother chose it," said Flo. They were the first words she had got in since her arrival, and they were only managed because Monica Nadin had taken up her cup.

"I thought oo were dead," she commented the next second.

"Who?" Flo asked. "No, my father . . ."

"Happen it's as well," said Mrs. Nadin promptly. "If he were as much worry as my mon, she's better 'bout him. Best thing as could be done to my mon would be tee a brick round his neck an' drown him."

Flo heard a slow approach of nailed boots.

"Here's the long-legged devil," Mrs. Nadin announced.
"Allus turns up 'bout half an hour late."

Flo nearly smiled at the contrast. Emmott Nadin could only just come in under the lintel. Broad though he was his height and straightness made him look almost slim. His head, too, was long, and was topped by white hair with which an old man would have appeared older, but which made his middle-age look younger. Flo liked him at once, though he did not give her any notice, walking slowly to the single high-backed arm-chair on the right by the grate. His cap he hung on a nail just under the mantelpiece, and one foot he rested on the steel fender in a posture that was obviously a habit.

"What the heckment have you bin doin'?" Mrs. Nadin attacked promptly. "Didna you hear me?"

"Happen I did," he answered in a non-committal drawl; and he smiled very slightly at Flo.

"Done yo' know who this is?" his wife demanded.

"Nao," he replied, not in the least interested.

"It's the new girl."

"Oh, ay," and he nodded very slightly and then looked back into the fire and went on sipping tea, drawing it in with a little hiss between nearly touching teeth.

"He's 'bout as interestin' as a log," Mrs. Nadin commented.
"If I didna talk, it 'ud be a dead place, this house. You dunna seem very talkative."

"No," said Flo.

"You'll have no need ta be," the farmer put in laconically.

This time he looked up somewhat more directly, as if he wished to get a fuller impression. He seemed satisfied. "I guess Missis 'as told you already how to get on here . . . keep your mouth shut. If oo'd tek her own advice, there'd be a bit more peace."

"Tha great gob!" exclaimed Mrs. Nadin, yet the dispute developed no further, and Flo gathered that this way of talking was more or less usual. As soon as he had finished his cup the farmer got up, put his cap on carelessly and went quietly out. Then Clem came in and dropped into the empty chair, keeping his cap on.

"Saw Sally Bowes as I went through . . . oo looks pretty close," he remarked.

"Fat as a farrowin' sow. If it isna twins it'll be triplets. If I looked like her, I'd keep in, 'stead of displayin' myself," said Mrs. Nadin. "Did yo' see Dot?"

"Never looked for her."

"Once she's out, she's satisfied, the flit-about," said Mrs. Nadin, leaning over the fire-bar filling up her second cup by tilting the kettle. "Doesna matter a tinker's damn about me stuck in workin' my guts out."

"You'll have a bit of help naa," he pointed out smoothly.

"Ay, an' like enough she'll be as bad by she's bin here a two-three weeks. Get another cup," she said suddenly, looking straightly at Flo. "If yo' dunna look after yourself, no one else will. It's find your own way to hell or heaven, an' if you havena got enough grit, you'll rot."

Flo helped herself. As she was doing so she heard someone else and looked round to see another man coming in. He was tall like Clem, but slimmer and neater, with longer features like the farmer, and a sandy tint in his hair and eyebrows. He looked at her in a straight but friendly way and said at once: "Hello, who's this? Anythin' left?"

"No; it's all supped," answered Mrs. Nadin promptly. "You dunna expect us always to have just what you're wantin'. It's non a restaurant."

"Oh, I thought it was." His voice was gentle, a bit like a woman's. He turned to Clem. "There's five geese just come in; the bonniest lot you ever seen. Across by Wood Corner."

"Oh, ay." The contrast in the men's interest was very marked.

"Come over from Redesmere, I guess. I hope they settle. A prime goose any good to you, Ma?"

"Ay, but if that young brat of Willox's sees them, it'll be someone else as'll be havin' goose, non us."

"The little blighter," murmured the last-comer, whom Flo had guessed was Bert. "If he does any more, he'll get a dose where he doesn't want it."

"But where he damn well needs it," said Mrs. Nadin. "What about milkin'? Are you leavin' your father to it all?"

They got up evenly. Clem moved to the door, but Bert went to the corner farthest from the window where for the first time Flo saw a rack in which were four upright guns, the oiled barrels standing to different heights. He took up the tallest, a single barrel, and even to Flo, who knew nothing about guns, there was something in his manner that told that he was as used to the weapon as he was to a knife and fork.

"If all fathers took as much care of their brats as he does of his guns, there'd be a crowd on 'em a seet better off," commented Mrs. Nadin, and called shrilly: "Dunna forget th' way ta th' shippon. It's non daan th' meadow."

Bert gave no indication of having heard.

"Run after him and see which way he goes," ordered Mrs. Nadin.

"Through the gate," Flo reported.

"The devil shoot him an' welcome," was the little woman's bitter comment. "Come on let's see if tha knows how ta wash up."

Chapter 6

MRS. NADIN was finnick. The pots, for instance, could not be wiped simply, but had to be polished. She did not like even a smear of damp to be left. So that they could be dried properly there was a supply of good dry soft cloths made economically out of different shapes and sizes of odd materials, but all neatly hemmed and finished with a little loop of white tape by which they could be hung on any of

three brass cup-hooks at the end of the mantlepice nearest to the sink.

"Naa then, a dry cloth for knives always," Mrs. Nadin ordered when Flo was about to go on with one on which she had dried only half a dozen pots.

The water was soaped till there was a froth of shiny bubbles. Mrs. Nadin's arms swished round in it with spasmodic energy that matched her incisive jerky way of talking. Suddenly she interrupted: "Go, see whether Bert's in th' shippon," and she almost snatched the cloth out of Flo's hands. "If he isna, he'll be by the watter; fetch him back," she ordered.

"Please . . . please I don't know where the . . . the shippon is."

"There's non so many doors if tha tries the lot," snapped the little woman.

Flo went out. There was the faint first blur of dusk coming, emphasised in the yard by the shadows of the buildings on three sides.

In the building that faced her as she walked down the path a yellow light glowed from a small square window at the end near the road. Hesitantly she went towards it across the rough cobbles. A wind came touring over the roofs and touched her with coolness and suddenly the strangeness of everything affected her and she stopped, wondering what was going to happen to her. The utter silence after the wind had passed seemed ominous. There had never been silence like it in Barrow. Almost directly over her was a star, so tiny that at first she was hardly sure whether it was a star or not. Its pinprick light in the vastness of grey-blue made her aware as she had never been before of insignificance. Among houses she had never felt small like this. Past the roofs she could see the hills and even they seemed dwarfed under the great sky. She felt helplessness. Why had she come? She thought of the distance that separated her from her mother and home and her eyes ached. Tears as large as thunder spots welled over and trickled warmly down the sides of her nose. She smudged them hurriedly with the back of her hand and broke into a run. A door waited open and she blundered in, being surprised to see turned towards her the back ends of thirteen cows in a long row. She had expected to find Mr. Nadin, but saw no

one; and then his voice coming mysteriously from somewhere at the far end said: "Eh now?" It was a quiet, friendly question, and abruptly she put up her hand to smooth away the tear signs more effectively.

The farmer's head came from between the flanks of a black and a roan, his cap comically pulled down the left side of his face.

"Is Mr. Bert here?" she asked.

"Mister Bert," he repeated with the slightest sarcasm. "And what would you be wantin' with him?"

"Missis sent me. She . . . she said if he wasn't here, I was to go down to the water.

"Oh, ay," said the farmer more sarcastically, and in a way that indicated that that was all there was to say about that. "How'd you like ta milk?"

"Ay, try a hand," said the voice of Clem, and a kind of steady swishing that had just begun to puzzle Flo stopped, and out unexpectedly from between the two end cows poked Clem's head, also with cap askew. "Yo'll be more use than traipsin' after yon mon every time."

"But . . . but Missis said . . ."

"There's a stool an' pail," interrupted the farmer, nodding to an oblong opening cut back into the tremendously thick wall, "an' Polly 'ere is a good 'un to start on."

He lifted himself with a single heave, balancing in his left hand a polished bucket half-full of milk and in his right the stool which he had picked up from between his legs.

"Ee, I don't know. I never . . ." began Flo surprised and hesitant.

"Put it here," said Mr. Nadin, taking no notice. He moved the stool a bit closer, and when she held the bucket gingerly between her calves, he thrust it snugly up between her thighs. "If you dunna hold it, yo'll have it punced away like a football. Sit up to her; Polly's a good gal, she winna mind."

Flo got the slightly musky cow smell for the first time. She felt chokey and wondered how she could escape, but the farmer was standing over her and Clem was on the gangway leaning against the wall, an expectant grin under the down curve of his cap. Flo looked up and caught the full flare of

the flame in the wall-lamp and then could not see when she tucked her head down to peer under the cow.

"Fore-tits first," said the farmer in a caressing voice that helped her. He passed behind her and crouched so that she felt his breath. "Like this," he explained, "fingers in line and press evenly into the palm."

She took the teats nervously and the cow stirred.

"Stond yo', Poll," coaxed the farmer. "It's non forcing it out; it's gettin' her ta let it down. Oo knows you're strange."

The teats were smooth and warm. Flo could feel, too, the warmth of the animal as she leaned close, but tried not to let her shoulder touch.

"Dunna be feart. Oo'll non let it come if you dunna give her confidence," urged the farmer gently. "There's nowt ta be feart on."

Flo was fascinated. As she closed and relaxed her grip and drew the first weak dribbles she forgot nervousness, forgot the creasing of her skirt, the showing of her legs and Clem's grinning stare. The uncertain dribbles she managed were tantalizing. Her right hand would get a sudden surprising flow, and her left, nothing; then nothing at all with either hand. There seemed to be no milk there to draw. Then Polly would let the teats fill and there was a satisfying tinkling trickle on to the bucket bottom.

"You're shapin'," said the farmer, getting up. "It's non a job as anyone can do. There's many folk can milk; but they're non all milkers by a long chalk. Clem, 'ere, he'd milk a piece of brass piping, but he hasna got the touch."

"You have ta be born with it," Clem mimicked, slouching away down the uneven-floored shippon.

"Some folk have and some havena," agreed the farmer, deep and confidential. "Keep trying . . . there's no other way."

Flo tried patiently. She wanted to please the farmer. She felt that it was a test. Her wrists began to ache until she could have cried out, but she determined to keep on as long as the farmer stayed.

"Try t'other paps," he quietly advised after a while, and

she was glad to change. She had imagined cows to be coarse-haired, like bears, but now she felt the silkiness of Polly's bag resting on her right wrist. The back paps were shorter; she had to bunch her fingers to grip, only Polly seemed to be increasing confidence in her and let the milk flow more easily. There began to be a kind of hesitant rhythm and Flo felt the beginnings of pride and thought how she would write home.

"You're non getting much froth," said the farmer with his faint smile, "but you're comin' on. When you can get half a bucket of froth you can begin to count you're a milker." Then he showed her how to draw her first finger and thumb gently down the paps to drip off. "That's one of the chief things," he impressed on her. "If you leave cow's partly-what done, you ruin 'em."

He went to the door and she heard the milk from his bucket going into the sieve and pouring through into the big can. She tried perseveringly, till at last she was sure that Polly was as dry as could be, and this she felt was confirmed by Polly's increasing restlessness. The cow must know how useless it was for her to keep on, so she got up. She forgot the stool and had to go back. She had about a quart, she judged, and she wondered if that was how much cows usually gave. Mr. Nadin met her at the door.

"Finished? Naa, let's see," and he led back. Grasping Polly's tail low down with his left hand he curved it up, holding it under the weight of his hand on her haunch, and reached down with his right hand. For a moment he massaged Polly's bag, then began to draw. His hand was huge and thick, but Flo, watching intently, got only an impression of its sensitiveness; it was a caressing hand, which surprised her by the instant, strong spurt of milk it induced. "Oo's non quite dry, you see," he said, not unkindly. "Fetch your bucket."

He crouched holding the bucket with his left hand. Immediately Polly had her tail free she clouted him boldly, but he took no notice. The milk rang the bucket bottom. Flo felt chagrined; evidently, she thought, she was not a born milker. But after half a dozen good draws all that the farmer got were a few drippings.

"Best part of the milk," he told her. "Creamy. You've non done so bad. Oo kept that drop up a purpose."

Flo at once felt proud once more, for there was a subtle suggestion of approval greater than the words in their simple meaning expressed. And immediately after that the farmer abandoned her as it were. He said no more but went along by the buildings and turned in at another door. After a moment or two he came out and went farther along and in at a third door. In there he stayed. Of Clem or Bert there was no sign, and Flo, standing by the big can with her empty bucket, felt that none of them cared what she did. She wondered whether she ought still to go after Bert, but she decided to go back to the house. As she approached doubtfully Mrs. Nadin seemed to bounce into the doorway.

"Where've you bin?" she demanded. "Did you get him?"

"No," Flo confessed, feeling guilty. "I've been learning to milk."

"Milkin' . . . there might be nowt else but milkin' as mattered. You were taken on ta help in th' house. Happen he'd like me ta milk an' all. He'd like me ta run the whole ditherin' place, outside as well as in, I reckon."

"I'm sorry," Flo murmured.

"You! What are you sorry about?" demanded the irate little woman. "You'll have enough to be sorry about 'bout being sorry for someone else's sorrers. I've bin waitin' ta show you your bedroom."

She bustled up the flagged passage that divided the house. From near the front door a steep stairway ran backward and took them on to a narrow landing with a long window at one end. There was exceedingly shiny oilcloth carrying a miniature turkey carpet design, brilliant in crimson and blue. Along it lay a narrow strip of grey matting bordered with a red line and two thinner green lines. Just by the top of the first flight a second lot of stairs, even narrower and steeper, took them to a small square landing. A single step on the left put them into a dark room with a single window at the far side, through which Flo saw the lake. The ceiling went up to the ridge like the side of a tent. There was a double bed with a pink counter-pane, a yellow painted dressing table with drawers,

and an ottoman dressed in chintz with a design of little mauve-and-orange daisies.

"You con hang your best things here," said Mrs. Nadin, in the corner opposite to the door, drawing aside on little brass rings a length of similar chintz, disclosing a triangle board fixed into the angle of the walls. Under the board was a hook like a tiny anchor with three tines. "If there's anythin' else you want, dunna be feart of opening your mouth. You've got a tongue, havena you?"

"Yes," said Flo meekly.

"Most folks has. The old man'll waken you of a mornin', so dunna think as it's hell's bell."

Immediately over the bed head Flo saw an iron bell as big as a four-pound jar, with a solid iron knob nearly as big as a golf ball on the end of the clapper. The bell hung on a spring which looked as if it were made of hoop iron. It was evidently rung by a wire that came through a slot in the wall.

"My, I shall be afraid of it falling," exclaimed Flo.

"An' if it does it'll give you a rare clout. It'll waken you, any road."

"I'm a pretty good getter up."

"So are most of us . . . when it comes ta gettin' upstairs for bed," said Mrs. Nadin drily. She was still a bit short of breath from the climb. She dropped down the single step and bobbed up on the far side and turned right along a narrow landing between a blank wall on the left and a handrail to prevent anyone from falling downstairs. At the end were two doors, one on the left into a long unlighted garret under the rafters ("Rubbish dump," said Mrs. Nadin), and the other into a surprising room more than twice as long as it was broad. It ran the whole length of the house, for there was a window at either end, and at no place was the ceiling more than nine feet high, falling away to five feet high at the other side. Had the two beds which were pushed against the wall there not had low heads they would not have gone under. The beds were ten yards apart, apparently not wishing to have anything to do with one another.

"This is where the two lads sleep," said Mrs. Nadin. "You'll keep this floor right, and I'll inspect it once a week; it's too near heaven for an old sinner like me ta come often."

One window was shut and the other open, and Flo guessed that the bed near the open window was Bert's. That was in the end, too, which looked out like her own towards the lake.

Mrs. Nadin set off down again. Then Flo was shown round the first floor; into the room where Mrs. Nadin and "the old fool" slept, into "Young Dot's" room, into the spare room "which doesna spare us from work nohow", and into the bathroom, which was as large as any of the other rooms, having evidently been made out of a bedroom. "When we're tight we fix a bed up 'ere an' all, and all goo mucky," Mrs. Nadin explained. Flo could not understand why they should ever need more sleeping rooms than there were already without the bathroom. By contrast with the two poky rooms in Balloon Street, Barrow, the farmhouse seemed to her colossal.

"You'll non need ta worry 'bout bein' short o' work," said Mrs. Nadin. "An' non o' your shoving dust under carpets an' spiders inta cracks. If I find any of those goings on' you'll get th' dust served up for your dinner an' spiders with it."

"Ough!" said Flo involuntarily.

When they got back into the kitchen a slim young woman was there drawing off white woollen gloves.

"Huh, you come back some time," Mrs. Nadin barked promptly. "When I was your age if I'd 'a stayed out as you do it would have bin down with my drawers an' my bare bottom spanked."

"Thank heaven I wasn't born in those days," said the young woman.

"You'd find you were back in 'em if I had my way," the older woman commented; and then with a complete change of tone, "Who've you seen?"

"Nobody very interesting," was the slightly drawled reply.

"Then what have you bin gawpin' at . . . nothin'?" demanded her mother with increasing aggressiveness. "If I stayed out, I'd stay out for summat."

"Who's this?" the young woman asked.

Flo saw a slight resemblance to Mrs. Nadin; small, somewhat crowded features, thin lips, and eyes inclined to glare.

"The new girl," said Mrs. Nadin briefly. "Florence;

though whether she was christened, or got it like a dog does, God knows. This 'ere's Dot; should have bin born a duchess, but I hadna copped the right feller."

Dot said, "How d'you do?" and began to loosen her coat, which was brown—a good Harris.

"If you want your things upstairs you'd better carry 'em" said Mrs. Nadin. "See Matilda, or Gertrude, Dot?"

Flo thankfully took her costume coat off the hook and her bass and lugged them to the attic. She shut the door and sank on the ottoman. Suddenly she thought of the chintz and of how she was creasing it. She tried to smooth it and then crossed to the window. The catch was back and the frame went up unexpectedly easily so that the weights bumped in their slots. She poked her head out carelessly and abruptly gripped the sill ridge, taken unawares by the height. Dusk had thickened, making the ground seem a tremendous distance below. But after a moment she recovered, and instead of looking straight down she looked outward, and there was the lake, with a white sheen on, as if some of the last light from the sky had fallen there and would continue to glow through the night. Between the house and the water there was a hundred yards of gently sloping meadow, and then a thick hedge of willow canes. Beyond the water was a dark cloud-like bank of trees with a hill rising behind. As Flo stared intently a shot smashed the silence, the flat, sharp report echoing distinctly three times away into distance. Totally unexpected, the shot made her start, and but for her grip on the sill ledge she might have fallen. She felt a brief recurrence of fear and drew back, and then leaned out again, forgetful, for from behind the willows had whirled up a great flock of birds that flickered whitely against the opposite hillside. There was a brief crying which told her that sea-birds were there, and in the silence that seemed to close in on the echoes of the shot like a lid she believed that she heard the rush of wings; but it was very faint, and perhaps it was a wind current moving in the grass, though up there she could not feel it. For several minutes she did not move, fascinated by this unexpected shattering of a peacefulness which at first she had thought to be utter stagnation, complete emptiness. Now she sensed a mysteriousness, and was dimly aware that

in the dusk there was an abundance of life that at present she did not know or understand; and she wondered if she would ever come to know about it.

The white flickering dissipated almost as swiftly as it had risen, but staring higher, above the opposite skyline into the grey shading of clouds, Flo saw occasional lonely black motes passing to and fro. Then the last of those disappeared, and her gaze came back to the still water-sheen and to the motionless dark grey thickness of the shallows. Slowly, so that at first she was not sure whether she saw anything or not, the black shape of a man seemed to materialize there; and then she knew that he was coming to the house. The thought that it was someone who had no right to be there, someone who intended evil, rushed through her mind; and then she smiled. Of course she knew who it was. If she had gone, as Mrs. Nadin had told her, she might have been with him now coming up the meadow. She felt a vague regret, but a moment afterwards shrugged it off, and hastily drew back into the room's shadow. Instinctively she knew that he was not like Clem, but strangely there had flashed back to her the picture of the youth lying supremely at his ease on the curved shell of the submarine passing the Barrow bridge, and suddenly she was aware that it was youth that she wanted. She had come into a household of old folks; she must . . .

The click of a gate latch interrupted and she leaned past the curtain. But there was a thick dark tree below and she could not see. Suddenly she remembered how long she had been, and quickly began to tug her blouse over her head and side-stepped out of her skirt. She dashed at the bass and struggled with the rope, which was stiff and hard as though it had been baked. But soon she was shaking a blue gingham frock down over upstretched arms and stiff-necked head. Swiftly she patted and stroked herself and ran to the glass to look how her hair had survived. She could hardly see and there was no time to light the candle. She let her hair do with a brief bunching all round with cupped hands. The strangeness of the stairs made her creep carefully. The kitchen door was shut, outlined by fine lines of light. It was an effort to put her hand on the knob and turn it because she felt like an intruder.

"Half-an-hour ta titivate thisel', by gum!" Mrs. Nadin greeted her. "Tha'll be another like our Dot."

Chapter 7

FLO thought that she would never be able to sleep in the strange bed. She lay for some time with open eyes towards the grey oblong of the window. She was conscious of the silence; next, only a few minutes later, as it seemed, she was wakened by a wild jangling.

Dimly she saw the bell kicking violently. Under the clangs of the clapper there was a tingling hum that seemed to spin in her eardrums. She jerked upright thinking of stopping the din, and then realized that she could not. The bell tossed for an intolerable time. She determined to knot a handkerchief round the clapper before next morning. When the bell nodded into peacefulness her head still buzzed with the spinning undertone. But after a while it cleared and she began to notice the house coming awake. A door banged somewhere, there were steps on the yard stones, a cow lowed knowing that a feed was coming; and a little later she heard the unmistakable rooting of a poker in the grate among the debris of a dead fire. This made her hurry.

A cool draught met her from the back door. Yellow light from the kitchen falling over the passage emphasised the outer darkness. The grandfather clock told her that it was only half-past five. Mrs. Nadin was bending near the fire which was roaring fiercely behind a "blower" made of part of an iron sheet advertisement. The edges where the enamelling survived showed bright yellow, making Flo think of mustard. The handle in the centre was a clumsy piece of hoop iron.

"'Mornin'," said Mrs. Nadin in the same staccato manner. "Set them basins out."

With a piece of charred flannelette she grabbed the blower and, carrying it like a shield, walked swiftly to the door. Specks of glowing soot eddied over her and the thing smelt. She dumped it with a clatter against the wall outside. The fire tossing its flames up the great chimney fascinated Flo by its prodigality. At home Mrs. Royer had always been so

niggardly with coal. Already the white cloth was newly laid on the big oblong table pushed towards the corner behind the door. Flo set five thick white basins in a row and then was told to add another. Mrs. Nadin spooned dollops of stiff oatmeal stew from a big-bellied brown pot out of the oven into an iron pan and poured milk on it generously from a two-quart blue enamel jug.

"Come an' wipe; an' keep an eye on this," she ordered, "an' if you let it burn, Dickie help you, 'cos I winna."

So Flo wiped the supper pots and every now and then vigorously stirred the porridge on the bar. From outside came more lowings, occasional shouts, little explosive clatterings of clogs on cobbles. Then steps passed along the passage and Flo caught sight of Clem going out.

"Allus late; he'll be late at his own funeral, that man," said Mrs. Nadin to no one in particular.

After a while the farmer and the two sons came in, all with hair anyhow, and in jackets which at first glance seemed mainly holes and frayed edges. They sat morosely and mechanically spooned up the porridge.

"Going to let us have another milker, Monica?" asked the farmer.

"Am I hellas like," came the pat retort.

He went on gulping enormous spoonfuls at an unvarying steady rate. After the last spoonful he pushed his basin into the centre and at once got up and went out without speaking again. Bert soon followed, but Clem, after pushing his basin away, rested for nearly five minutes on his elbows, hands loosely linked, arms lying in a "V".

"Happen you'd like ta stop an' do the housework an' let Flo go out," said Mrs. Nadin tersely.

"No; I'd sooner let Dot go. Where is she?" he asked in his slow manner. "Thinks she'll retire now, I bet." But after that he slouched out.

"She'll not retire on me," said Mrs. Nadin to his back. She went along the passage and from the stair foot bawled: "Now, our Dot, d'you come down, or mun I come an' make you?"

Flo heard some sort of reply, though she was unable to catch it clearly. Mrs. Nadin came back apparently satisfied,

but after a further ten minutes her impatience boiled up again.

"Go up an' if she isna out, pull th' clothes off an' bring them down here," she ordered. Thinking that she must be joking, Flo hesitated. "What are you waiting for?" Mrs. Nadin demanded. "Dunna you understand plain English?"

Flo set off, scared by the little woman's viciousness. She was not sure even which was the right room, but she tapped on the only shut door on the first landing and got in reply an unwelcoming, "Come in." Dorothy Nadin was still in bed, and stared questioningly. The flame of the candle on the chair near her trembled a little.

"Please, miss, you're to get up," Flo murmured. "Missis sent me."

"Did she? Didn't she send a cup of tea?"

"No," said Flo.

"Well, don't stop and stare."

"She said I was to take the clothes down," Flo explained steadily, moving a step nearer.

"Did she? You dare!"

"I . . . I don't suppose she meant it, but she . . . she seemed to," said Flo at a loss. "She's . . ."

"She meant it all right; but if you try . . ."

The threat was unfinished. The speaker had not moved except to turn her head so that she could look straight at Flo. Flo shifted her weight uneasily and unconsciously ran her tongue along her top lip.

"What can I tell her?"

"What you like; only get out," said Dot; but suddenly she tossed the clothes down and sat up. She was in a pink flannel nightdress with narrow cream lace at the close neck and round the wrists. She was thinner than Flo had thought.

Dot felt her hair, which was very dark. The two legs of one of the big copper-wire pins round which it was wound had come untied and she slowly drew the pin out, leaving the lock dangling, a single absurd spiral down her left cheek. Then she seemed to become aware of Flo still waiting. "Are you stuck there?" she demanded.

"No," Flo answered. "Shall I tell her you're getting up?"

"No; if you want the clothes, take them; tell her I've done with them," and she lifted her feet over the edge and got

out with unwilling deliberation. Flo turned away and went back to the kitchen.

"Well, where's th' clothes?" demanded Mrs. Nadin at once.

"She's out, so I didn't think you'd want them," said Flo. There was no reply.

After that Mrs. Nadin kept herself too busy to nag Flo. They washed the porridge things, and reset for breakfast. Bacon was cut in two-foot rashers which curled right round the great iron frying-pan. This bacon had only three thin lines of lean, but it smelt clean and sweet and appetizing. Two lots had been done and lay crisped on a big oval willow-pattern meat dish in the oven before Dot came down. Her lock was back in its pin, and she looked neat in an ironed overall-apron covered with tiny little marigolds.

"Lady La-di-da now, eh?" said Mrs. Nadin. "I didna take her on ta do thy work. Get toasting fork."

Dot did not answer, but Flo felt the coolness of her antagonism. Whenever in their work they moved near one another, Dot either passed her over with an uninterested stare or looked past her as if she did not know that she was there.

"Has she bitten thee? What's up with her as you dunna like?" demanded Mrs. Nadin unexpectedly just as the grandfather clock began to grind inwardly ready to strike seven.

"No," said Dot, "she doesn't trouble me. She'll be useful for serving in the cabin, I should think."

"Yes, an' so will you, madam," said Mrs. Nadin grimly.

The clock finished its chime with a sigh, thankful to get that done with, and up the path came Clem. Bert came five minutes later, but there was no sign of the farmer.

"Fetch him," ordered Mrs. Nadin, and Flo went out into the grey chill morning. He wasn't in the shippon, nor where the horses were. She tried to push the big door that reached up to the slates. It had little wheels evidently intended to run on the line on the stones, but it was jammed. Then she noticed a wicket in the big door and stepped through doubtfully into the gloom of lofty space. After a moment or two she saw on the right an untidy hay mound, what was left of a stack; and on the left built up against a whitewashed wall were three tiers of bulgy sacks. There was a peculiar smell

which reminded her of sawdust and of Saturday night in town at home. She wondered why; and then it came to her that it was something like the smell that came out of the public-house doors if they happened to open as she passed, only there was no smoke with this smell. But, of course, it couldn't have anything to do with public-houses; she must be mistaken. She was about to step over the high sill back into the yard when a resonant thump of wood came from somewhere past the far wall of the barn, and then faintly she heard Mr. Nadin talking to "Monica" about something. She ventured across the broken floor into darker shadow and then made out a farther door set back in the thick wall. It grated to her push and she looked into a square lean-to with a biggish window of dirty glass in a roof of old corrugated iron. The sides seemed to be railway sleepers. A narrow gangway divided the lean-to and there were little square pens, three on either side. Mr. Nadin was in one bending gravely forward.

"Breakfast," said Flo.

"How done these suit you?" he asked in a quiet tone.

In the pen were two calves, a red-brown and a white, their heads stuck into a bucket which the farmer held tilted at the height of his knee. They sucked and guggled, and shoved and swayed, and looked so young and curly that Flo could not keep her hand off. Where she touched, the skin jerked as if her fingers tickled like a fly, but the youngsters were much too greedily engrossed to bother further.

"Two grand uns," said the farmer. "Pity as Monica's white."

"Why," Flo asked.

"Not supposed to be as good . . . dunna know why."

Flo, privately preferred the white because it looked so clean. Now the sucking was more noisy till the red lifted a froth-decorated nose, only the next instant to plunge back and shove blindly all round the bucket bottom. The white gave up and stood splay-legged, staring solemnly with damson eyes.

"Monica?" said Flo.

"Because it's like the old woman . . . non very big, but plenty of guts on it." He chuckled; and Flo noticed how the calf's belly bulged as if it were with what it had drunk. "Never know when they've had as much as is good for 'em,"

added the farmer with the same caressing quality that Flo had noticed in the shippin. He latched the gate and looked into the next pen. Here was one calf, somewhat larger. Flo held her hand over and the calf nosed for it eagerly. She flinched, but then held her fingers steady in the warm slaveriness of its lips while it sucked energetically. Her middle finger seemed to fit into a groove. She thought the calf must imagine that it had got its mother's teat, till all at once it gave up and quested with its nose round about. But what it wanted was not there either, and it mooded childishly.

"Like to feed 'im?"

"Yes, please."

Mr. Nadin picked up another bucket and the calf nearly butted her over. "You'll spill, you silly thing," she ejaculated and laughed without knowing. The calf thrust in so greedily that its nostrils were drowned. Its sneeze and shake splattered her with suds, but she did not mind. "It might never have drunk before," she exclaimed.

"He hasna . . . often, non that road," said the farmer appreciatively. "And he'll non have many more here."

"Oh?" said Flo.

"Off to-morrow; we conna bother with his sort."

"Why not?" she asked, feeling the eagerness and warmth of the youngster against her, and loving it.

"Eat too much; an' you conna milk 'em."

"Oh," she repeated doubtfully.

At last there was no more, and the calf blinked ready to fall asleep.

"It's not going to be killed, is it?" she asked anxiously.

"Nay; Jack's taking him," he answered; and she wondered who Jack was, but she judged from the farmer's tone that he was a person to be trusted.

"Breakfast," she exclaimed, suddenly remembering. "Missis'll be cross."

"Eh, dunna worry about her," he advised, indifferent.

"If it isna one thing, it's t'other."

He jangled the buckets together and led into the barn and through a door on the right, where she saw this time a row of the heads of cows. All the great eyes of those nearest seemed to be watching her gravely.

"I mun get you out milking reg'lar," said Mr. Nadin. "If you dunna get chance you'll never learn."

He opened a little gate into the central stall and pushed his way between two cows. When Flo followed they seemed both to lean on her, and for an instant she was afraid. As she escaped a tail slashed her neck. The unexpected touch of the coarse hair made her flinch; then she laughed, relieved.

"Do they sleep here?" she asked, looking at the sodden sawdust.

"Yes."

"I—I thought they had straw."

"They do, when we have any; we've run out," and he marched on as if there was nothing in sleeping on a brick floor. Flo wondered if it was something that the cruelty people ought to be told about, only somehow she could not think that the farmer would deliberately wrong the cows.

"You never know," he said partly to himself. "You conna look at 'em too often." Flo wondered what he meant, but she did not like to ask. He latched the lower door, but left the upper part open carefully halfway.

"Bin ta Moss for him?" demanded Mrs. Nadin tartly the moment they got in.

"She mun come out milking wi' me tomorrow mornin'," said the farmer slowly, but with a certain finality.

"You'd best stay in an' help me then," his wife retorted. "A fine kettle o' fish you'd make on it."

He seemed not to hear. Clem had a *Farmer and Stockbreeder* tilted against a quart jug and did not look up. Bert was chewing steadily, and every few seconds sucked a mouthful out of a white pint pot. Dot was at the corner nearest to the fireplace.

"It's in th' oven," said Mrs. Nadin scarcely interrupting her eating. "If you conna come, you mun look after yoursel's; it's non a boarding-house."

Flo got out for the pair of them. As after the early morning porridge neither of the sons moved till Mr. Nadin finished, and at once got up and half-filled a bucket with steaming water from the sink.

"Dunna be taking all that," Mrs. Nadin warned, getting up briskly.

After that Flo was never given a moment's rest. It was what Mrs. Nadin called "Upstairs morning". To Flo it seemed like a spring-cleaning, for everything had to be lifted out, the carpets taken up and beaten; and finally all the furniture had to be polished as if it had never been polished before, though it was as bright as glass.

"Wearing ourselves out," said Dot. "I wish you'd some sense, Ma."

"Mucky house, mucky mind," retorted the little woman, working with energy that never flagged. "A fine midden-hole you'll have if there's any fool as'll give you chance."

Then Flo peeled potatoes. Not till afternoon did she get a minute alone. Just before three Mrs. Nadin unexpectedly explained that she always took a "two-three minutes shut-eye; when you get to be an old hen like me you'll find as you can do wi' it", and off she stumped upstairs as vigorously as she had set off in the morning to the cleaning. Flo was apprehensive of what would happen while Dot had charge, but almost at once Dot went up the passage, too, and then the house went quiet and still, except for the tick-tock of the grandfather in the corner. It was such a lazy tick-tock that Flo wondered whether the clock were forgetfully taking a snooze also and getting terribly slow. Certainly it seemed a long time since she first came downstairs; a long day. She idled a little over the washing-up, stirring the grease slowly round without thinking of it. She tried to imagine what her mother would be doing; the time when they said "Good-bye" seemed a much longer way back than the day before.

The silence made her nervous all at once whether Mrs. Nadin might be listening, so she clashed two plates together and began to wipe. Then a timid mew made her look down. The grey barred cat purred and lifted its tail vertically all except two inches at the tip and rubbed its flank against her leg. She selected three pieces of mutton gristle and the cat's purr became louder, almost like the sound of sawing. She stooped and played her finger-tips in the fur of the animal's crown. When she stood to the sink again she was surprised to see a strange float entering the yard. The driver was young with very prominent cheek-bones and very light cream hair very short and upright. He walked briskly up the path,

and after the least knock lifted the latch and stood square in the kitchen doorway.

"Clem about?"

"I—I don't know," said Flo, staring.

"He's got a cawfe; said he'd have it ready," the newcomer explained without any sign of being put out. "You're new here, aren't you? Are you from round about?"

"No."

"I thought not; I reckon to know pretty well everybody hereabouts . . . an' there's non many as don't know Jack Knight." He smiled, showing big regular teeth. "I wonder if he's left it somewhere."

"I can look," said Flo, hesitant, then going towards the door.

He moved out and waited just outside. She noticed that he had clogged boots. He was no taller than she was, but he walked in almost a military way, with short quick steps.

"What did you say it was?"

"A calf . . . bull; roan, I think."

"Oh," muttered Flo. "That wasn't what you said."

"Don't they say 'cawfe' where you come from?" He laughed again. "There's funnier things than that as we say; you'll learn a few off Monica, I reckon."

"She does talk," she agreed, somehow relieved to be able to discuss her with someone.

"Like a rat-trap; makes up for the old man. Says what she wants an' be damned to you. There's a few round here don't like her, 'cos she non feart of telling 'em . . . But she's straight. I like folk as say what they mean."

Flo wondered about his age. He sounded older than he looked. The horse, a half-legged piebald, hadn't been brushed, and the paint of the float had flaked off, grey wood showing in patches and blotches. The traces were chain, badly rusted.

"They keep the calves at the back," said Flo, pleased to let him know that she knew something. But he seemed to know better than she did, for he crossed to the barn and went confidently through in front of her. He glanced over the pens and said at once, "This is him", and jerked the bolt out. It was the calf that Flo had fed. It struggled up and capered

stiltedly away, as if its legs were clockwork and not its own, but her companion caught it skilfully and hoisted it under his arm, right hand under its belly.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Flo, scared.

"Take him; that's what I come for."

"But how do I know . . .?"

"Oh, tell 'em it's Jack; it'll be all right," he said easily, manœuvring carefully through the doorway. "We'll ha' to find a sack . . . any old thing."

The calf began a spasmodic struggle and seemed about to slip out of his grip backward, but he abruptly shifted his arm from under its belly and held it in both arms, fore and aft, so that its legs were bunched and it was helpless. This amused Flo so much that she laughed out and Jack looked at her appreciatively.

"You know how to laugh, anyway," he said. "Look in yon corn bin; there's gen'ly some old sacks . . ."

She lifted the flat wooden lid. There were several sacks, strong heavy ones, but those, he said, would not do. "There's money on them; we want one as is no good."

"What's it . . . for?" asked Flo.

"To put him in, of course."

"You'll smother him."

"Non th' way as I do it," and he grinned at her ignorance. "Here, the beggar's gettin' heavy. We'll let 'im walk."

Set down the calf stood stiff and trembling. Jack shoved on its haunches from behind and it leaned back, and when the pressure was too strong, it let its rear stagger sideways, but kept its fore feet planted. Then Jack shoved at its shoulder and got it straightened towards the door once more, but it would not go reasonably.

"The stupid little brute," exclaimed Jack, and lifted it bodily over the barn sill.

"Let me try," said Flo. Possibly it was because it felt safer in the light, but now the calf paced gently on and all she had to do was steer by patting its neck when it veered too much to one side, as it tried to do nearly all the way. Jack led to the stable, where behind the door he found a sack with three ragged holes in, but with bottom more or less intact.

"You hold it," he ordered, stretching the sack mouth. Adroitly he captured the calf, tipped it upright, doubling its legs, and began to try to get it rear first into the sack. But now it fought with all its strength, and got a leg free, and hit Flo on the knuckle, so that she let go. "Hold still, you little cracker," panted Jack, hugging it in a kind of rugby tackle.

"Isn't it cruel?" asked Flo, wondering whether she was doing right.

"If he'd keep still an' sensible, he'd go in like your foot an' know nowt about it."

They tried again. All at once the calf weakened, and Jack shook him down as if he were potatoes. Only his head stuck out. The sack was gathered in round his neck and Jack tied it with binder twine from his pocket. Never had Flo seen anything look more pathetic than the calf did then lying on its side gazing out on the world with great bewildered eyes. Once or twice it fumbled its legs. It moored in its helplessness. Flo heard an answering bawl from the shippon.

"Mother," said Jack. "Surprisin' how some of 'em remember. They make a fuss, some o' them. Hark 'er." There was the rattling of a chain. "It's just hearin' him. Probably never thought owt about him for a week," said Jack; but to Flo this careless view seemed callous. She thought of the calf now as a human baby. Jack bundled it up and dropped it in the float bottom, shoving it to one side with his boot.

"Where are you taking it? You shouldn't do that," said Flo, growing hot. "I don't think I should have helped. I'm sure Mr. Nadin wouldn't . . ."

He looked up and his eyes were very blue and held a quizzing look, so that her anger flagged again.

"Don't worry; he's a grand 'un," he said. "I'm goin' to look after 'im. Tell the old man I'll see him right sometime. Come up, mi old cabhorse!" This to the piebald gelding, and the float began to turn and rocked and slipped over the rough yard. Flo saw the calf nodding as if he had no strength left except barely to keep his head up. She didn't know even yet whether to let him go. But at the gate Jack gave a queer stiff flip with his left hand and then was hidden by the building. It was too late. A little pucker of worry came between her

eyes, and as she went back to the house she considered whether to go upstairs at once and tell Mrs. Nadin.

Only when she got in Mrs. Nadin was down and snapped out before Flo could say anything, "Where've you bin?"

"A . . . a man came for a calf; I don't know . . ."

"Where was Emmott? It's none o' your job."

"I don't know, but he said . . ."

"Who were it?" Mrs. Nadin interrupted.

"Knight . . . Ja . . ."

"Good cess you got rid of 'im!" she exclaimed. "Talk the hind leg off a dead donkey. Knows everything there is ta know an' a dang seet more—ta hear him talk. Got it off his father. He talked till he even got tired o' listenin' to 'isself, so he went deaf. Deaf as dead mutton; and Jack'll goo deaf an' all. What was he after?"

"Calf . . . the one by its . . ."

"Did he pay?" demanded the little woman abruptly.

"No," said Flo.

"Huh!" was the satisfied comment. "Into 'is pocket it would 'a gone and I'd 'a seen nowt. But we'll see about this."

She rolled back the wristbands of her tight black moire frock and went off into the pantry. Flo, relieved, walked back to the sink. Apparently there was nothing wrong about Jack Knight taking the calf, except as it affected Mr. Nadin. Dot was by the sink.

"Time you'd done," she said coldly. "If you dawdle you'll be no good here."

Flo kept silent.

"Don't you answer when you're spoken to? Didn't they teach you that in the paupers' place?"

Flo nearly asked, "What paupers' place?" but stopped just in time. "I didn't know what there was to say," she answered.

"Sulking won't do you any good."

"No," said Flo.

"And don't answer me back like that."

"No," said Flo again, flustered.

"No, what?"

"No . . . no . . .?"

"Don't you know to say 'miss'?"

"Eh! What's that?" demanded Mrs. Nadin coming unexpectedly. "Lesson in manners? Lesson in daftness, more like. If you want ta start miss-ing an' madaming, goo on th'midden; that's best place for that muckment."

Dot retorted: "You've no right to have a girl. You spoil them all. Of course she ought to say 'miss'. Any maid should."

"You shut you're trap," said Mrs. Nadin briskly, but without anger. "You've too much ta say, all of a piece. If she suits me she'll suif you, or you lump it, as the Irishman said to the donkey when he shoved it to the mule."

Dot did not reply, but stepped closer to the sink and when Flo stood aside pushed the kettle stiffly under the tap straight in front of her. Momentarily the water hit on the outside and splattered them, but it wet Flo more than Dot. As the fire was being poked to seat the kettle, Bert came in.

"What's Jack payin' for yon cawfe?" asked Mrs. Nadin at once.

"Didna know as he were takin' one," said Bert without interest.

"Nao, I thought not. Bit o' 'bacca money as we're non supposed ta know about. Your dad thinks he's smart, but he's non th'ony smart one."

"It'll be bull-calf," said Bert. "Pass us the paper, Dot."

"Get it yourself; you're as well able to."

Flo wondered what would happen when the farmer came. She felt guilty, as if she had made a trap for him. All at once she thought of taking the greasy water out to the grid on the excuse that it might choke the sink pipe. Then, possibly, she could warn him.

"Eh, where you goin'?" asked Mrs. Nadin. "Boilin' water and soda'll soon start th'pipe agen; dunna bother that road."

Flo turned back, and a short time after heard the farmer coming. Before he was properly inside Mrs. Nadin was at him: "What about that bull-cawfe, you tight-fisted sinner?"

"Bull-cawfe?" he repeated, appearing to blink.

"Non of your soft," snapped his wife belligerently. "That as Jack Knight took."

"Didna know as he'd took it," said the farmer with the same lack of hurry.

"Nao; but you know how much he's payin', an' that's what. Where do I get mi extras, eh? Odd shillings here, odd shillings there, all into thy long pocket and away ta keep th' Kicking Donkey kicking."

Mr. Nadin sat in the high-backed chair by the fire and asked Dot for his cup as if the tirade had nothing to do with him.

"Run this place on nowt, like Patsy's donkey, for all you care. A belly on you like a tank when it comes ta beer; why the damn it doesn't drown you beats me."

No one appeared to be attending; only Flo felt that she was responsible. At first chance she'd tell the farmer she was sorry, but that it had all come about unexpectedly. After a brief space of silence she was astonished to hear the farmer quietly declare :

"I'll take Flo out ta milking; she's the making of a good 'un," and then he took a long audible suck from the edge of his cup.

"Take 'er, will you? Then you'll pay her wages," retorted Mrs. Nadin.

The farmer did not trouble to reply.

Chapter 8

FRIDAY, Flo had been warned, was baking day. She thought of her mother's modest baking and wondered why it should be worth naming a day for it. But as soon as the morning porridge was done out she was taken to the end of the yard away from the road into a small outhouse which she had never gone into before. The wash-boiler she recognized at once, but alongside was what looked somewhat like a child's wash-boiler. There was the same raised fire-hole beneath, but the brickwork instead of being square, made a round funnel three feet high; and instead of there being a boiler inside, all she found was a flat iron plate a foot below the open top.

She lit a fire beneath the plate without being able to guess

what its use was. She was told to make a big fire, which would go together into a good redness. When she got back to the kitchen Mrs. Nadin had her sleeves up and was standing on a wooden stool nearly hidden from her waist up in a tremendous wide-mouthed earthenware crock, which she called a "panchion". She mixed energetically and was too busy to nag anybody. All that she appeared to have in the panchion was oatmeal to which she kept adding a little milk and more water till it mixed into a thinnish paste.

"That's the stuff to put guts into you," she said, stepping down.

It wasn't clear to Flo whether she referred to the exercise of mixing, or to eating the oatmeal. She told Flo to carry the panchion, and Flo got hold, but could scarcely move it. Mrs. Nadin laughed and told her to fetch one of the boys. Clem was just pouring milk into the sieve outside the shippon and seemed glad enough to leave his bucket. Flo waited to see what happened. Mrs. Nadin dipped up a big spoonful of the mixture and dropped it on the hot plate where it quickly spread thinly and evenly. After a very short time she adroitly turned it over with a flat wooden shovel, like a butter pat twelve inches across. When a moment or two later she lifted it out of the open top of the "oven" it was a flat cake a quarter of an inch thick and twelve inches or more in diameter.

"If you've never had 'em hot off a griddle, you've missed summat good," announced Mrs. Nadin. "Fetch a dinner plate."

She dropped the next one like a pancake on the plate and told Flo to spread it with honey. The oaty flavour and the rich brown honey, which was from heather, were new to Flo, and she thought that she had never tasted anything nicer. On getting back to the wash-house she was surprised to see how the stack of oat-cakes was growing. When eventually Mrs. Nadin finished it was nearly two feet high.

"Are we going to eat all those?" asked Flo.

"All be gone by Tuesday, dunna worry," said Mrs. Nadin.

After breakfast she began another baking, which to Flo was equally surprising. The panchion was nearly filled with flour into which lard was rubbed. Flo had never seen this done, and she stared fascinated, but she was sent to the attic, where

she was tantalized by warm, sweetened smells that seemed to arrive in waves. When at last she went into the kitchen again the table was covered with pastries, some ready for the oven, some already crisped and browned. There were four dinner-plate pies, six dinner-plate jam tarts decorated with criss-crossed strips; and, to Flo most surprising of all, a pasty which covered the bread board and looked as if it would scarcely fit into the oven. Mrs. Nadin balanced the oven shelf on the fender and carefully shovelled the pasty on to it and in it went.

"Whatever's in it?" asked Flo, unable to keep quiet.

"Currants an' raisins . . . dunna you like them?" asked Mrs. Nadin, wiping back a finger of hair, leaving a flour smear over her left eye.

"My!" exclaimed Flo. "But do we eat all this?"

"Be gone by Tuesday. Appetites like wolves, they 'ave. If you gave 'em dry bread an' water, they'd starve theirsels; but give 'em summat as'll tickle their fancy an' they gutses themself's till they welly bust."

Flo got only the gist of this, but she was afraid to ask more because obviously the stooping and heat were curdling Mrs. Nadin's temper. Last thing before dinner she mixed another panchion of flour, punching and kneading it, and left it with a white cloth over on the fender. Immediately the meal was done she told Flo to go with Dot and clean out "the cabin". "An' dunna be making friends wi' the spiders; kill 'em," she ordered briskly.

Dot went out by the front door. Hére, there was a straight flagged path to a gritstone wall as at the back, but the gate opened into the mowing field and Flo could not think where they could be going with their brushes and scrubbers and buckets of hot water. Then for the first time she noticed twenty yards down the green bank a tarred wooden shed. A faint track went to a door in the centre of the end which was towards the house. There was a padlock which Dot opened, and Flo stared into a room fifteen feet wide and twenty-five feet long, going up to a peak twelve feet high. All the inside was stained a very light brown. Against the wall on the left just inside was a table, and down the centre was a much longer table covered with white damask-patterned American cloth

fastened along the edges with brass-capped carpet nails. A score of simple wooden chairs, also stained light brown, stood to the long table or against the walls. There were two windows only, both in the same side, but these were towards the lake, which Flo had not really noticed as she walked down. In the sallow willows there was a wide gap which seemed to have been opened purposely, so that Flo saw a small green bay, where tiny waves were spilling on a beach of brown-grey sand and green-grey stones. At the left end of the bay a dock ran in between deep banks to an open boat-house, the greater part of the tarred felt roof of which was hidden by the sprawling arms of three old hawthorns and a tall ash. In the motionless dark water of this dock three rowing boats lay side by side with a crude punt half as broad as it was long, all its sides perpendicular, exactly like a very big drawer without a handle.

"Boats," exclaimed Flo. "Whatever for?"

"Sailing in . . . what d'you think?" answered Dot coldly. "Give the place a thorough clean out. Mother will inspect it, so you know . . .," and out she went. Flo saw her pass the windows and go somewhere behind the boat-house. Later Dot appeared walking down the beach two hundred yards beyond, where there were no willows but only open grass with a few stunted hawthorns above what Flo supposed would be high-water level. There Dot paused and looked across to where on the far side there were taller, thicker trees, alders and oaks and a few ash.

Dabbling close in there were two black birds which Dot appeared to be idly watching. Then she strolled on out of sight once more behind the hawthorn bushes. Flo felt envious, and a sudden longing came over her to see the lake properly, to go exploring. She stopped pushing the long brush and impulsively let it fall against the table. After a careful stare towards the house she slipped hastily round the cabin corner. There she was hidden, but being in the open she still felt visible and ran down the bank, only slowing when she was almost at the boathouse. A path was worn along the side and she went on and round the back and was startled to find an open door.

"Hello?" came an inquiring voice. She stopped, trapped, and had half turned to run back when Bert Nadin's close-

shaved head and lean face came out. "Oh, it's you." He straightened and leaned against the doorpost unhurriedly. Lying up the grassy bank that closed them in, Flo noticed half a dozen oars.

"How d'you think you'll like this part of the world?" he asked conversationally.

"I don't know," she muttered, still worried about her truancy.

"There's water where you come from, isn't there?" he went on. "You'll know how to manage a boat?"

"There's the channel; but I've hardly been on it, though I've been in a boat at . . . at . . . I forget where," she finished weakly.

"Oh, so you don't know anything about fishing," he said as if regretfully, "or wild-fowling?"

"No," said Flo. "I'm supposed to be working; I didn't know you were here."

"Didn't you?" He smiled and she felt much more relieved and was curious to know what he had been doing. Her glance sought into the darkness past the doorway, but all that she could see was a glassy deep-green water reflection.

"I'd better get back," she said, unwilling.

"What's the worry?" he asked. "There'll be nobody till tea."

"But missis'll grumble . . ."

"Well, you don't let that worry you? She'll grouse whatever you do. Our Dot's supposed to be with you, I bet. If the old woman says anything, tell her Dot went mooning down the lake."

"I don't know," said Flo uncomfortably. "Whatever do you do with all these?" meaning the oars.

"Row. Did you think they were butter-pats?" he asked, quizzing.

"But why so many?"

"To row with." He smiled tantalisingly. "Like a sail?" Straightening, he half turned to go back in. Flo took a step and saw just inside a narrow wooden stage with three boats afloat and motionless beside it. Past them, as from a cave, she saw the boats and the punt that she had first seen, and beyond was the steel-blue expanse of the lake. She felt an

unusual pleasant sense of intimateness with the water as she stood there on the wooden stage. In the shadow the water was green and threw up a faint moving light, like marbling, on the walls and low roof; and there was a constant tiny jabble and suck of ripples talking as it were in whispers to the boats. This feeling of intimateness was somehow akin to the feeling she had known in glass-roofed Barrow market among the flowers and vegetables and quiet murmuring people in that time that all at once seemed a terribly long way off. She was stricken with a choking homesickness that made tears start in her eyes with such unexpectedness that she could not blink them away. She smudged them off hurriedly with the cuff of her blue working frock. Bert Nadin was bending to pull in the slack of the rope to the nearest boat, and she was sure that he had not noticed. She coughed, trying to clear herself, but she could not speak. The boat began to slip towards them, starting V-shaped flutings on either side, and causing the faint green marblings all round to run and mingle as at play.

"This is Swallow, the best of 'em," Bert was saying.

"Oh, but I can't, I can't," exclaimed Flo.

"Why not; feart o' being seasick?" he asked, glancing up so that she saw his profile lit by the light from the door and against the dark water.

"No, no; I must go," and she stepped backward and turned and ran.

Why, she did not know; except that she wanted to get away to where she could get the choking out of her throat and the smart out of her eyes. She ran up the bank and stumbled into the cabin and dropped her elbows on the long table and sobbed. She wanted her mother; she wanted to feel her mother's arms about her shoulders, to have her comfort. Flo let herself sob wildly, till all at once she was afraid and looked up, as alert and tense as an animal, staring between fingers still curved about her face. At the window was Bert. His hand was held to shade the glass from refraction, and for several seconds he looked in intently; then he turned and went away. She watched him to the boat-house. Her paroxysm was over. What would he think? The one fact that was a bit of solace was that it had not been Clem.

She felt that Clem would certainly have taken advantage; but perhaps Bert wouldn't say anything. Abruptly she got up and looked round the unfamiliar place and wondered what it was for. They were all preparing for something . . . Mrs. Nadin, Bert, and herself . . . but for what? This question helped her. The intense depression which had overwhelmed her lifted as she brushed and dusted and washed the American cloth. She was surprised when Dot passed the window; she had forgotten her.

"Finished?" asked Dot, looking about pryingly. "Whatever have you been doing?"

"How d'you mean? Working," said Flo, in no mood to be put on.

"Your face," Dot took her unawares. "Have you been crying?"

"Crying? No . . . why . . . why should I?" stammered Flo, feeling her cheeks going hotter.

"Huh, crying for your mammy and you've only just come. You know you've got to stick here?"

"I didn't say I'd been crying," said Flo, feeling murderous. "I haven't. I've been working. You should have been helpin' . . . leaving me to it all. I . . . I . . ."

"Now then, remember who you're talking to," broke in Dot in a higher, harsh voice somewhat like her mother's. "I won't be spoken to like that by any pauper's brat, you . . . you pimply little tarnach."

"I'll speak to who I like. I'm not going to be treated like . . ."

"You'll be treated how I like; you'll see how you'll be treated. How long are you going to be? I'll tell her you'll be coming in an hour or two," she finished sarcastically, and abruptly she picked up the long brush and marched out.

Flo was tempted to shout after her, but all at once her spirit ended its flare and she felt a return of her choking homesickness, so that instead of running to the door she turned to the window. There the lake was being touched by a peculiar light almost to pure white, as if it were a paper sheet; and in the shallows there was gold, the glow of thousands of open ball-flowers. Instantly Flo forgot all else and a strange solace seemed to come from the beauty. White and gold . . . the

combination lasted richly for seconds only. As she stared the whiteness was sullied by shadow till it became grey, and the gold faded and left only the dark mesh of branches. But the effect remained with her. As she gathered the cleaning things she remembered the wild daffodils that Mrs. Mawson had given her . . . white and gold . . . and home, which she had thought so far off, somehow seemed to come nearer again. She went towards the house slowly, laden with strange mixed feelings, dreams and fears, hopes and hesitations, and a faint half-knowledge that she was growing richer with experience of many things.

Chapter 9

BY night the house appeared to Flo to be stocked enough for a siege. Thirty-two loaves and oven-cakes were stacked in the cellar pantry, on a cloth, at one end of the whitewashed stone bench; beside them were fourteen currant-spotted "bun-loaves"; and spread out along the bench were the tarts and pasties. The house was filled with a tempting crusty smell.

The following morning immediately after porridge Flo was told to go and light the iron stove in the cabin, and to set cups and plates and cutlery for a dozen. There were special pots kept in a cupboard near the door. They were of plain cream ware, substantial. Flo felt better and was curious to know where all these visitors were to come from. It was rather nice being alone in the cabin, like playing at house. The stove was stupid and smoked at first, but then it abruptly began to roar cheerfully and flickered brilliantly through its chinks.

Outside there was mist, particularly dense over the lake, so that she could not see the water, and the mallards were only shadows in the whiteness. Too early for visitors, and yet she was puzzled because Bert had not been in with the rest for porridge. Where could he be? She listened at the door, but the whole valley was still and silent, as if there was no one astir anywhere. She went back to the house slowly. Mrs. Nadin had a pile of bacon rashers nine inches high, and was steadily carving more from the long flitch. Dot was cutting a new

loaf, and had three plates already built up with thick rounds. Flo was told to get the marmalade. It was in a seven-pounds stone jar, and she scooped till she had three glass dishes filled. Then she was set to rolling yellow butter into big pats, and this was like play, too, though the pats she made at first were any shape but round.

"Get th' big tray," ordered Mrs. Nadin, bustling.

Plates were inverted over the cut bread and Flo was told to leave it on the table just inside, as far from the stove as she could.

"Here's a damp cloth; cover that over it," said Mrs. Nadin. "If we give 'em dry tack they'll, happen, stop 'ayin' their eggs."

Flo wanted to ask who "they" were, only there was no time because Mrs. Nadin was halfway to the pantry. The tray measured a yard one way and two feet six inches the other. Flo's arms ached when she staggered into the cabin and slid it on to the table. She set out everything as neatly as she could, and felt particularly proud of the three conical piles of butter balls, which almost seemed to glow.

When she got back Mrs. Nadin was cutting oatcakes into quarters, and the frying-pan was already busy. Flo was told to have her breakfast and then to put a clean apron on. While she was eating Bert came in. He wore waders which glistened blackly. He looked fresh and pleased. Flo noticed, because she watched him still with slight apprehension that he might ask what she had been crying for in the cabin. He had not mentioned it the previous evening. He dumped down without looking at her and exclaimed, "By God, I'm clemmed; give me summat."

"How long'll they be?" demanded Mrs. Nadin.

"Non so long; time's past. They'll be more for biting themselves than the' fish is."

He began to take his porridge in rapid spoonfuls. On the plate with her bacon Flo found an oatcake quarter crisp-hot and nicely browned. It had a clean, slightly mealy taste, and was so good that she wondered why they had never known anything about them at home. Then there was a rat-tat on the front door, and down the passage came a loud, "Anytime, Ma."

Mrs. Nadin, in a hurry, tossed the long pink-white bacon slivers into the big frying-pan. Dot teemed steaming water into a huge brown teapot; when it was full she had to use both hands to carry it. Then the first plates of bacon were ready, and to each were added two segments of new crisped oatcake, and a rich fried egg. A cloth was put over everything, and Flo was told to hurry.

Waiting in the cabin were two men in big boots and tweeds, lounging close to the stove and drinking while Dot stood by. Her hair, which usually she kept in her copper-wire pins till afternoon, was already frizzed out, and her apron was pink with a frilled edge. One of the men was middle-aged, the other under twenty; both were pleasant and at ease. Flo hesitated.

"Don't stand there," said Dot sharply. "Don't you know that the gentlemen want their breakfast hot?"

She flicked the cloth off and nodded to where the plates were to be put.

"Does it look good?" asked the younger man, and whistled and turned eagerly to the table.

Through the window Flo saw a boat with three men glide from behind the shallows into the little bay. Standing balanced in the stern, one of the occupants was winding line in down a long delicate rod, and another rod stuck out over the back-board.

"Breakfast for three more," ordered Dot briskly. "Don't stand staring."

"You sound as though you got out wrong side this morning," said the younger man rallying.

Flo, as she went out, heard only the beginning of the reply: "If someone didn't keep them in their . . ." It was not hard to guess at the next word. Flo dabbed the tip of her tongue half an inch out through tight lips and as quickly retracted it. She didn't care, anyway, because it seemed as though it was going to be an interesting day. One of the other men was on the beach steadying the nose of the boat while his companions stepped ashore. All of them had such bulky clothes on it was difficult at the distance to tell whether they were young men or old. But when Flo got back she judged them all to be in the twenties.

"Gee, a new maid; we're comin' on. Where are you from, sweetheart?" asked one who had rather a Jewish look.

Flo, taken by surprise, said "Barrow."

"Oh!" he yelled with a rising inflexion as if he had been bitten. "You don't say! Do you happen to know Bill Smith there, a fellow with a cork leg and a backbone of bed-spring?"

"No," said Flo, reddening.

"Don't know Bill Smith?" he demanded, apparently tremendously surprised. "Oo, you should do. He never sleeps on a bed because his backbone's so well sprung; and when he wants to pick his teeth he takes a splinter off his thigh." And suddenly he put his arm round her so that she nearly dropped the tray.

"Stop that," snapped Dot. "If there's any carrying on you won't get fed here."

"Oh, thank you for those kind words," said the long-haired young man, bowing. He laughed and his pals laughed, and Flo wondered what they would do next.

The amazing appetites all the men had! Dot stayed and poured tea and talked, but Flo was kept travelling to and fro, fetching more bacon, more bread, more oatcake. Another three men came up, older, more staid. They had done better than the others, and talked fishing and were listened to. Bert strolled in and lounged by the stove. Flo saw that he was popular.

"Have you done milking?" Dot demanded.

"No, cattle's milking theirsels," he answered easily. Dot could not think of a suitable retort at once and finished with a rather weak, "I bet they are."

"Surprisin', isn't it?" said Bert.

Flo was sent back with dirtied pots. She soon found that there would be no time all day for anything but looking after men who had come to fish. For one o'clock dinner two more were added to the morning eight. Mrs. Nadin carved a great sirloin, the meat glistening with good blood. The potatoes were British Queen, white and mealy. "When you're wed, allus get British Queen," she advised Flo. "Men think more of their guts than owt; give 'em a bellyful and you'll ne'er have any trouble." Obviously Mrs. Nadin enjoyed catering.

When the last plate was filled she bustled to the oven and peered anxiously inside. The Yorkshire pudding, eighteen inches square, had risen higher than the sides of the tin, and made Flo think of bubbles. "Out o' me way," snapped Mrs. Nadin, her cloth-muffled hands gripping the tin firmly. She led down the hall almost at a trot. At the cabin door Dot waited, holding it open.

"What-ho!" shouted the exuberant, long-haired young man.

The tin was planted on a waiting mat at the near end of the long table. Without waste of a second Mrs. Nadin began to cut the pudding into squares. The knife bit crisply and released sweet-smelling steam. All the Yorkshire puddings that Flo had seen had been flat and sodden-looking; but this was so light it collapsed like brown meringue, and made her mouth water so unexpectedly and abundantly that she had to swallow five times in quick succession.

"Never tasted Yorkshire puddin's like this nowhere, Mrs. Nadin," said one of the older fishermen, chewing, and at the same time scratching the centre of his bald head with his little finger, while his fork stuck up like a three-pronged lightning conductor.

"You never saw no one as put such good stuff in," said Mrs. Nadin, rosy and sure of herself.

"I've bin comin' here six years an' oo's never made a failure," the bald man told the room generally.

"It's eggs," said Mrs. Nadin. "Eggs, an' dunna be feart of 'em. You canna make good puddin' 'bout good stuff."

Dot poured extra gravy for those who wanted it. Flo passed the salt or mustard or water. Mrs. Nadin stood and talked. Then Bert came in hugging across his chest twelve bottles of beer.

"Good old fourpenny!" shouted the long-haired man. "Have one with me, Ma."

"Nay, I'm too old for a cock like thee, lad. Offer thi drinks to a pullet," retorted Mrs. Nadin. The older men laughed as though they had heard that before. The young man looked at Dot and then at Flo, and was about to speak when Mrs. Nadin broke in again: "If any on you gets drunk, it's out you go. An' if any on you tipples wi' the old man, I'll scrat your eyes out."

There was a *pop*! as Bert drew a cork, but no one spoke. Flo was told to bring more glasses, and on her way back she passed Mrs. Nadin, carrying the pudding-tin empty. Their own dinner was kept till all the fishermen had finished and everything had been sided except bottles, glasses and ash-trays. As she left for the last time, Flo heard loud laughter and knew somehow that it was about something that referred to herself. There was no pudding with the meat in the house, and the potatoes and carrots were dry, having baked to the pan bottom. Mrs. Nadin, however, seemed unaware, and chewed quickly and indifferently. Mr. Nadin, who very seldom said anything at meals, this time never spoke, and as soon as he had finished, got up and went out. Bert soon went also, though out by the front, and only Clem wasted time as usual on the couch.

After dinner Flo looked at all the stacked pots dismayed.

"Shove a bomb under 'em; that's best way to get shut," said Clem, leaning with his forearms along the table, and grinning.

But Mrs. Nadin bustled in from the pantry, turned on a heavy spurt and held her hand under the tap, waiting for the hot to come. She set the pots out so quickly that Dot and Flo working hard, could not keep up with her, till Flo realized that this time it was not necessary to polish everything.

"We give 'em a good do when we finish," said Mrs. Nadin, noticing how she had quickened.

All afternoon there was no rest. Just before three a party of four tramped up to the back door, knocked, and without waiting, clamped in to the stairs, and stacked on the bottom steps two worn suitcases, two bulky haversacks, and a bundle wrapped with black oilskin. Then one of them, very tall and round-faced, with a curious growth like a quarter-inch wart on the left of his nose, came back and leaned into the kitchen and asked: "Okay till Monday, Ma?"

"If you can behave," said Mrs. Nadin.

"I reckon we could do with a wet before we start."

"Ale or a brew?"

"Brew; . . . I think fish smell ale."

"They should be used to it wi' you lot," she answered.

"I ne'er knew such swill-bellies."

"If they'd come in a lot, 'stead of all ta' pieces, there'd be more sense," said Mrs. Nadin when he had gone.

The big kettle was put on and was kept on till after six, being topped up whenever there was chance. Not all the folk who came were fishers. Some came simply for a row, though not many, because of the empty trees and the water still being grey, but there were five parties of walkers who stopped on their way through the valley. Dot kept in the cabin. Mrs. Nadin stayed in the house, except for an occasional vigorous trip to see if everything was being done right. Flo was kept at it to and fro; and whenever there was a moment, she was told to wash and wipe pots. Dot ordered her in the cabin, and Mrs. Nadin ordered her in the house. The little woman's patience gave out about the time when normally she went upstairs for her after-dinner rest. Clem came in for his drink.

"You great gawp, clear from under mi feet," Mrs. Nadin exclaimed. "There's noo tea for idle bones."

Flo had just gone to the fire to lift the kettle back. He put his arm round her, and she felt his hand heavy on her hip.

"Do me an' the old man a cup, or there'll be ructions," he said cajolingly.

She glanced doubtfully across at Mrs. Nadin.

"Give it the babby; he'll blub 'is eyes out if you dunna," came the bitter retort.

Flo brewed in a little pot, but was uncomfortable. Then the farmer came in and sat in his chair, and held out his hand.

"It's a good job somebody's got time for us," he commented gently; and Flo felt better.

"A fine one you are ta talk," stormed Mrs. Nadin. "Muckin' an' messin' from month end to month end; an' when somebody's mekkin' a bit, all you con do is plank your great mucky self in the way."

He sucked at the edge of his cup and stared over it into the fire as though he had not heard. Clem winked at Flo.

"The four's here, so dunna be upsettin' 'em wi' none o' your soft blather," said Mrs. Nadin threateningly. But it passed over the farmer with as little apparent effect as a wave over grey rock. There was no suggestion of Flo helping with milking. The farmer and Clem went off morosely, and

Mrs. Nadin aimed after them a brisk: "Good shuttance!" After seven, while helping to clear up the cabin, Flo saw Bert steering in with the four men in the punt which he forced along cleverly with a heavy wood paddle. The four made for the house and went in by the front door.

"Finish off this lot," ordered Dot.

Flo was glad to be alone and dawdled a bit. She was weary, and wandered what else there would be to do. She had hoped to have a little time to herself at weekends at least. When she got back to the house there was loud talk and gusts of laughter in the front room. She heard the *plup!* of a cork, and soon the piano began to ding out: "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do". The men sang spasmodically, and sometimes the tinkling went on, alone. Mrs. Nadin was looking after a tremendous hot-pot from which seasoned steam clouded up every time the oven was opened. Flo, having finished washing up the last of the cabin things, leaned back, half sitting on the sink edge, not caring to use a chair while Mrs. Nadin was still on her feet. Mr. Nadin came in and hooked his cap on the nail in the frame of the grate just by his chair. In the varnish graining there was a segment of a circle marked by peaks left momentarily swinging, pendulum-like. He sat in shut-in silence for five minutes, then abruptly demanded: "What the hell is that row? If it's Dot, fetch the bitch out."

"Fetch 'er out thyssen; tha's big enough," snapped Mrs. Nadin, "an pig-headed enough."

He did not move, gazing into the fire in sombre silence again. The tinny piano played on and choruses were sung noisily, tune-careless.

"I'll hack the damn thing up," announced the farmer unexpectedly.

"An' it'll cost you twenty quid," was the instant retort. "Smash thi long legs, summat as is thi own; but if thee smashes owt o' mine, tha'll rue."

He kept silent again, and Mrs. Nadin ordered Flo to get the tray and stack pots. At nine promptly she was sent into the front room. Dot was sitting very erect on the stool playing with nimble fingers, while a youngish man with sandy hair, on a chair beside her, leaned over the keyboard and sang and

beat his right hand on the piano end. A big fire winked on five empty bottles on the blue and white Dutch-girl-and-boy patterned hearth tiles. The fug of ale and tobacco made Flo choke. The big man with the growth on his nose was full-length on the horsehair settee, his big stockinged feet sticking off the end. Bert, drawing on a big cherry-wood pipe on the right of the fire in a flat-backed armchair, was talking seriously to a middle-aged man with a completely bald head. The fourth, of the party, younger again, was watching Dot from the side on the right of the door. His hand held a glass and he sang between drinks. Flo looked round where to rest the tray, while she put the cloth on, and he patted his knees. As she leaned towards him he completely surprised her by slipping his left hand round her neck, hooking her head down, and wetting her forehead with a quick, dabby kiss. She jerked away, all the pots shifting and tittering, as if scared, too.

"Take care," ordered Dot harshly over her shoulder.

The young man winked and grinned and licked his lips. Apparently no one else had noticed. Flo looked in appeal to Bert, but he merely glanced with a slight arching of his sandy eyebrows and went on talking. She had flushed and knew it, and she felt sweat under her arms and between her thighs. The fug seemed all at once to thicken and become more distasteful, and she coughed in an effort to clear herself. There was nowhere to put the tray, except on the table corner, so she managed as best she could, aware all the time of the young man watching. She dared not lean with her back to him. Setting was awkward, because in addition, she could not get down the side where the settee was. Only at last she was ready to go. She held the empty tray as a shield on her left. The young man let her get past and then she felt her right wrist gripped hotly from behind and he jerked her round so violently that she almost fell. The startle made her cry out. The piano rhythm broke, but was picked up after Dot, by the briefest glance, had learned what had happened. The rest stared and then laughed as Flo smashed the flat of the tray clumsily on the young man's crown. He started and the dregs from his glass spattered his knees. His grip momentarily weakened, and Flo snatched her wrist free. The next

moment he was thrusting himself up, his face creamy-white, eyes staring.

"Now then!" came unexpectedly from Bert; there was a terse so-far-but-no-further tone in it. The young man seemed to grope for something, then said: "Eh?"

Flo slipped out.

"Ma'll toe your backside and out you'll go if you try that here," Flo heard Bert saying. Nevertheless, she was afraid. She held back till Mrs. Nadin asked exasperatedly whether she thought that they wanted to be at it all night.

"Let the child be," said Mr. Nadin quietly.

"I'll let thee be if tha dunna shut up," she threatened, transferring her anger. "Get thi great gob stuffed wi' that," and she planked the first loaded plate of hot-pot by his side on the oven top. Flo, grateful, held out a knife and fork. He took them, got up leisurely and tugged his chair to the table. Flo, with the loaded tray, went nervously along the passage, though determined to fight. But the steaming plates with their meaty smell turned the thoughts of everybody except Dot to feeding.

"Th' biggest for me," said Bert jokingly.

She selected it quickly and put it close to him. It was half-past eleven before the last of the things was washed. Then Mrs. Nadin at once ordered Flo to bed, adding: "There's another day to-morrow, dunna forget."

Chapter 10

SUNDAY was perfectly still and very mild; spring pensive, thinking of summer. All the fishermen went out just before dawn; Flo heard their talk going away to the water, and then the wooden rattle of oars tumbled into empty boats, and the creak and splashing dip of rowing. The sounds passed beyond hearing and the valley silence was complete again, but Flo lay and thought apprehensively of the young man. If he tried any more tricks she would be ready, though.

The great bell rang startlingly precisely at its usual time. When Flo got down Mrs. Nadin had already been to the

cabin, and she asked sharply why it had not been tidied more.

"Miss Dorothy was there; and she never said go back," Flo explained.

"We'll have her up, the young madam," said Mrs. Nadin sharply. "Go tell her."

The bedroom door was locked. Flo knocked and called, but all she got was an impatient: "All right; all right."

On Flo's report Mrs. Nadin stumped up and filled the house with thumpings. "Come on," she shouted. "Out o' that. Open this door." But it was not till twenty-five minutes later that Dot came down.

All day there was the making and delivery of meals; the collection and washing of pots. Mr. Nadin made his usual demand for Flo's help for milking.

"You great crackpot, you," retorted his wife, "tek yon boots off an' milk next cow wi' your feet; you're clever enough ta do two at a time ta hear you talk."

The farmer kept out of the house except for short meal-times. Flo saw him going about the yard, watering the cattle and horses, carrying hay or buckets. Bert seemed to spend all his time at the lake; Clem disappeared after breakfast and did not come back till after tea to help with the evening milk. Dot was moody all day. In the afternoon many teas were served to casuals who had apparently strolled from Moss. Flo, so new to the work, was interested in everybody. There were several visitors whom she liked the look of; whenever there were any of this kind Dot seemed particularly annoying. Two young men with fair hair and fresh cheeks came in. Flo brought the tray, only to have it snatched away just inside the door.

"You've come without the cream jug, you great booby," shouted Dot across the hut. Both young men looked up, and Flo imagined that she saw smiles forming. She felt humiliated and vindictive.

But finally dusk began to gather. Flo went slowly to the cabin, with a lingering stare over the lake. The sun was down behind the black hummock of the hill, far down the valley. A very pale rose stain was left, though most of the sky was grey-blue and dove-grey with lavender suggestions in the south. But on the water all these colours seemed run

together with silver. Flo thought that a terribly dear piece of shot-silk might have looked the same; real Japanese silk it would have to have been. And even then, of course, it couldn't have given quite the same effect of cleanness and quietness. Bert was in the little bay collecting the boats. He looked all black, and the boats looked black, but the ripples that went off from round them caught the light and showed in fascinating transient silver lines and curves. Flo stopped. It was the only time all day that she had had time to watch. Now all the boats were tied together, and Bert, standing up, began to pole the little flotilla towards the boathouse. He disappeared into its shadow as if he had, all at once, been obliterated, but the tail boats stopped and waited patiently outside. She remembered that Bert had promised to take her on the lake, and she wondered if she might go now; it would be lovely to be afloat on silk; and the willows and woods all round, with the hills behind, looked mysterious and ghostly. She imagined putting her hand over-side and feeling the delicious smoothness of silk and immediately laughed at herself. Of course, how foolish! It would simply be cold and wet. She shrugged and turned back to the cabin.

Filled with the sheen of light held on the water, her eyes were at first baffled by the gloom. She shut her lids and waited just inside. A movement, felt rather than seen, made her start violently. An arm came round her from the right, from behind the door, and she felt herself losing balance. She swayed half right, half backward, and was enclosed helplessly by a second arm. A hand shut clumsily on her left breast and hot wet lips smothered her mouth. There was an ale taste, the smell of strange unpleasant breath. She stared for an instant into grey eyes with whites flecked yellow and pink, and then felt herself released. Her flung-out hand caught the side wall. She saved herself from falling only by effort. She had not even cried out, the attack had been so adroit and unexpected. Now she saw the young man grinning satisfaction. His cap was on his head back, the peak standing up, a cloth halo, with a few streaks of black hair radiating from beneath it on a pale forehead.

"One back for swiping me on the napper," he said, panting a little.

She stared, quivering and wary. If he came again she would slap her hardest and cry out. But something in his grinning manner prevented her; a simplicity, perhaps. As she stood fronting him she realized that there was no depth in him; he had acted as a child acts, from impulse, without thought. He had been there and she had almost walked into his arms. Yet it must not happen again.

"I'll tell Mrs. Nadin," she threatened quickly.

"Gimmie another," he invited. "No reason why we should fall out . . . no reason at all."

"Get out," ordered Flo, "or I'll shout."

"Why shout? Shout nothin'," he urged intently. "Have a drink."

"Get out," she repeated, more confident.

"You don't think I really minded? Have a drink. You're a proper lass. It's good . . . you . . ."

"If you don't go I shall run and tell," said Flo insistently. "She'll not have you again. And if I tell Mister Bert, he'll . . ."

"Him!" exclaimed the young man scornfully. "You're a bloody bright one . . . I offer you good beer an' . . . an' . . . Here, I say, let's have a bit o' real good."

His hand groped for the front of his trousers and he began to unbutton. For a second she was at a loss. Then all at once she went tight all over with revulsion. Then her only impulse was escape. She turned and ran. She ran to the house because of its nearness. There was a light in the front right window, and she was aware of men at the table, though only dimly, as if they were all completely strange. In the passage her flight was checked by the clatter her boots made on the flagging. It sounded foolish and unnecessary, for there had been no pursuit. She slowed to walking, but she had reached the kitchen before the impulse to get away from her tormentor was expended. Mrs. Nadin glanced and saw her. At the table folding a cloth was Dot.

"What's up?" demanded Mrs. Nadin promptly. "Where's them pots?"

Flo was about to blurt out, but caught Dot staring curiously as if she had already guessed something. Gloating and superciliousness seemed together in her look, and Flo's intention

of confessing was abruptly quenched. She swallowed. "Dunna stand gawpin'. What's up?" demanded Mrs. Nadin.

"Nothin'," said Flo, and turned back up the passage because she did not know what else to do.

At the front door she stopped. She heard talking in the front room, but this only increased her feeling of loneliness and helplessness. Instinctively she felt that the men there would only laugh. She peeped out. The cabin doorway was empty, but it had been empty the first time. Steps approached in the room. She slipped out and ran to the right in front of the house, till she came to the yew that held dark foliage over the garden wall. Its reddy scabbed trunk was built in with the gritstone, a part of the wall. Stepping on one of its roots, as on a ladder rung, she was safe over in two seconds. Five yards away, on the other side of the gateway out of the yard into the meadow, yellow light flowed from an open door. It set up a kind of magnetism, so that she moved towards it, without conscious intention, and found herself looking into a four-shippon which she had not seen before. Under the first cow, looking up questioningly, sat Mr. Nadin.

"Eh, lass, come ta help?" he welcomed her.

Hesitantly she told him, "No, I . . . I'm supposed to be siding the cabin."

He seemed to guess at once and said, "If it's one o' those b's gettin' fresh, tell me which an' I'll neck-an'-crop him into the water." He said it quietly, as if to do what he threatened would be a simple, pleasant job. He went on stripping slickly, making the last quick draws at the fore teats and at the rear teats. "Where was it, in the cabin?" he went on, guessing from her silence that she would not tell which one it was. "They're a pesterin', idling set. 'If I had my way . . .'" His unusual loquaciousness ended as he heaved his weight off the stool and swung the milk bucket up. He went to the other end of the shippon and let himself into the yard, as though deserting her. She heard milk running, and then he was coming back. Stooping, he set the empty bucket on his stool by the wall, and without a word went in front of her into the field and round by the garden corner. Flo kept three paces behind till near the cabin doubt made her go

slower. He stepped in, looked round briefly, and in a moment was coming out.

"If you have any more trouble, tell me . . . I'll cure 'em."

He went back with long slow strides. Flo began hastily on the siding that had been so long delayed. She was relieved; she knew what she would do if there was further trouble. Fortunately, she did not have to go into the front room, being put to washing up while Dot attended on the men. It was half-past eleven again before everything was finished, and the idea that Flo should have, at least, a little of the day to herself never came up at all.

"Good neet. Five o'clock in the mornin'," said Mrs. Nadin, as briskly as if she had done nothing all day.

Although Flo was out of bed before the big bell had finished tossing, and though she dressed without delay, she found Mrs. Nadin leaning over the bacon-board with a stack of rashers already cut. Flo was sent out at once to light the boiler fire, and told not to waste time, because the front room table had to be set. Breakfast was to be at six, but the first of the visitors did not come down till ten past. It was the big man with the growth on his nose. He sat without speaking, and at once forked up and pushed into his mouth the brownest piece of bacon off his plate. The young man did not come till twenty-five minutes past. Flo had put his plate ready beforehand, and kept away from him, but he was gloomy, and seemed to have forgotten all about the previous evening. She realized that she had been foolish to let the affair worry her. Nevertheless, she resolved to be careful with him. She was surprised when the big man asked if the trap was ready. She went into the kitchen and asked. Mr. Nadin interrupted the regular spooning up of his porridge to say:

"I'd trap the b . . . rs. Are yo' supplyin' 'em with cotton-wool ta lap themsel's up in, Ma?"

"I'll supply it to stop your great gob," retorted Mrs. Nadin. "If you ever talk sense, it'll choke you."

"If he's to waste his time drivin' that useless crew, I'll take Flo," he said still quietly, but in a much more determined way.

"Tek who you like so long as you get out o' mi way.

I'll come an' milk 'em mysen an' wash wi' t'other hand, if you like," she offered. "Tha met think tha's get all th' cows in creation ta milk, but there's a two-three elsewhere, even if there is no bigger fool milkin' 'em."

She crossed briskly into the pantry. Her husband showed no annoyance, but when he unslung his cap from its nail he nodded briefly to Flo. It was nice to get into the yard into the morning freshness. She felt jaded, and it eased her. The farmer filled a bucket from the trough, and took down a cloth which had been drying on a nail just outside the shippon door. The bucket he set down on the shippon gangway. The cloth was soaked, and then partially wrung. Spreading it over his right hand, he caught the first cow's tail with his left hand, curled it up and rested his weight on it, on the animal's hip. Stooping, he reached between the cow's legs from behind and carefully wiped its bag, as far as he could, and wiped the rear teats. Then leaning over to the right he finished off the fore part of the bag and the fore teats.

"Think you con manage?" he asked, handing her the cloth.

Flo rinsed it and went to the second cow. This was more nervous, and as she caught its tail it swung its rear end across the stall.

"Come over, you fool," ordered the farmer, and it at once jumped back, nearly bowling Flo down. She caught its tail again. It jerked strenuously, but she held on and imprisoned it on the beast's hip, and leaned down and began gingerly to wipe. The beast flinched, then stood stiltedly, though Flo could feel it tense, ready to leap away at the least hurt. She used a kind of massage movement and was gentle, and the cow eased.

"You'll manage," said Mr. Nadin.

He went to rinse his hands in the trough, and came back with his bucket, and soon milk was sizzling pleasantly into the bottom of it. Clem came in, and then there was a duet. Clem raised his eyebrows at Flo, but did not speak. Flo became more used to her job and began to be amused, and wondered what her mother and Ivy would have said. Most of the cattle, after a brief first attempt to free their tails, seemed to understand and gave no trouble. Before going to the four-

shippon she got fresh water. When she had finished she wondered whether she was expected to go back to the house, but there was a calm sort of friendliness about the cattle and in the shippon, and she was reluctant to go in. Mr. Nadin, however, seemed to be expecting her to stay, for as soon as he saw her idle he told her to feed the calves. He had ready a bucket of milk which he instructed her to dilute a little. The calves behaved as though they were famished, nearly charging her over and spilling everything. They thrust their noses in too deep, and got froth and milk up their nostrils, and snorted and coughed and made a great to-do, all the time shoving jealously, sure that their neighbours were getting more.

"You greedy, silly things," shouted Flo; but they took no notice. They drained the bucket quicker than it could have been done by a pump.

Flo looked over into the empty stall and wondered where the bull-calf was, and whether it was still tied up to the neck in the sack; and she thought of Jack Knight, and wondered whether he would come for any of the other calves. She was going back to the shippon when Mrs. Nadin knocked on the kitchen window and beckoned briskly. Flo groaned and kept the bucket in her hand, as proof that she was busy.

"Tek them things an' put them to soak," ordered Mrs. Nadin, nodding to an immense heap of sheets by the door.

"I'm supposed . . ."

"Ne'er mind that old fool. Let 'im do summat 'isself. Work never killed anyone an' 'e's as tough as muck. If tha lets him, 'e'll have you runnin' th'farm. Cleanliness is next ta godliness, an' a darn seet more important on washin' day."

Flo went with the clothes and shoved them in the oak-spale tub, and tipped cold water on and jabbed them with the boiler stick as if she was determined to drown them.

"'Ere," said Mrs. Nadin, entering unexpectedly, "tha'll wear 'em out. Souse 'em under, but tha dunna need ta pounce holes in 'em."

She lifted the lid off the boiler and sniffed the steam. She snicked the fire-door open and poked vigorously with a long iron like a ram-rod. She shot more coal in and smacked the door to with a clang.

After breakfast Dot was left to side and wash up and tidy the house while Flo went back to the wash-house. Mrs. Nadin rolled her sleeves, revealing arms brown and plump, which she plunged into the hottest water without hesitation. She had seemed to enjoy baking, but she seemed to enjoy washing more. When the boiler lid was lifted and steam boiled up, she stood on a milking stool and dug in with the stick with all the zest of a child after the best prize in the fish-pool. Out came sheets and pillow-cases and bolsters, and were swung adroitly over into the bucket balanced by Flo on the side. They dropped in with a souse and an uprush of more steam. Flo felt moist all over; her clothes were clammy, almost as if she had had a hot bath with them on. Then she mangled and everything had to go through three times. Mrs. Nadin planted the stool at the mangle end and kept getting up and giving the screw on top an extra part-turn till Flo could hardly get the rollers round.

"Good manglin' saves hours o' waitin'," said Mrs. Nadin succinctly.

At last the first basket was ready, and they went out to hang the line. One end was slipped over a hook, deep driven in the yew, and there was a stump twenty yards off in the meadow. After being taken round this the end was carried back to the corner of the four-shippon, giving a fine triangular span, with room for everything. Wind caught the clothes and laved them gently so that Mrs. Nadin stopped by the gate with the basket empty and said with unusual placidity: "That's a bonnie sight, lass. A good washin'-day's worth a fortune."

"Yes," said Flo, aware of the difference in whiteness between the washing there and that that her mother did.

Going slowly to and fro along the right-hand side of the field was Mr. Nadin, leading Colonel, the shire, with a roller, which clanked pleasantly every now and then.

Clem had gone to the station with the half-legged horse, Job, with the milk. Flo did not know where Bert was. She went back with Mrs. Nadin, and after the new-grass brightness and blowiness of the meadow, the wash-house seemed duller and more confining than before. Flo saw little sweat "blisters" all over Mrs. Nadin's forehead, and her straight hair plastered itself on her little round cranium almost as if it

were grey and black paint. The second basket was filled with shirts and handkerchiefs, and Flo took it out unaided. As she was pegging the last of the things, she saw Mr. Nadin walking up.

"You con manage Colonel," he said quietly. "Go on rolling . . . I've another job."

"But I . . . I'm helping Missis," exclaimed Flo, astonished.

"That's all right; I'll see 'er," and he went on to the yard.

Flo left the basket and walked to where Colonel was standing apparently almost asleep, nodding, so that every now and then his nose fell on the stiff thorn spikes of the hedge and made him start. Twenty seconds afterwards he would nod and prick himself again. Flo said, "Wake up," and hooked her hand in the ring by his mouth as she had seen the others do. She thought it strange that Mr. Nadin should have left her to find out about the job herself. Self-consciously she said, "Gee up!" in as gruff a voice as she could. Colonel tilted his ears very slightly but stayed solid. She tugged and the old gelding let his head follow her hand, but his body stayed where it was and the shafts with it. At the extent of his neck reach his head stopped, and though Flo tugged her hardest, this had no further effect.

"Come up; don't be so soft," panted Flo, using both hands.

Suddenly the heavy gelding seemed to lose balance, plunged his near fore-foot eighteen inches to the right and swayed as if about to fall on her. But he did not. The only result was that he shifted himself and the shafts and the roller eighteen inches, but the effort must have exhausted him for he went solid again and appeared about to fall asleep completely. Flo did not know what to do. His spasmodic lurch had scared her. She tugged once more, though not with the same vim, and this time not even his head would come. She wondered whether he were sick, or perhaps tired out. She laid her hand on his smooth chestnut neck just above his collar and was surprised by the warmth. He inclined his head a little towards her and let his lower lip fall loosely and moved his tongue so that his bit clinked. She grasped his ring to try again and caught sight of Mr. Nadin coming from the gate. Realizing how she had wasted time she made a last big effort, but Colonel was set, immovable.

"How many rounds?" asked Mr. Nadin.

"I . . . I couldn't start," said Flo.

"Bejabez, why not?" he inquired gravely.

"I think there must be something the matter with him."

The farmer took the bit, Colonel braced himself. The roller began to turn and they went down the meadow at a measured walk. Flo stared, undecided whether it was Colonel's joke or Mr. Nadin's. When she got back to the wash-house Mrs. Nadin asked briskly where she had been, but ducked into the tub without waiting to hear. She was rubbing flannels and to reach to the bottom she had to put head and shoulders in the tub; she looked so comical that Flo could not help smiling. Mrs. Nadin popping up caught her.

"Stick your own wooden yead in," she ordered, standing aside.

Flo bent unwillingly. Suddenly her skirt was snatched up, and she was smacked smartly. She jerked up, scarlet, but Mrs. Nadin grinned till her features were all puckered together.

"You'd do with some fat on your buttocks," was her only comment.

Flo went out with more clothes. The roller had worked nearer. As she finished, Mr. Nadin stopped twenty yards off and beckoned.

"You let 'im bamboozle you. You'd better have another try or you'll never do any good," he said. Colonel turned his near ear so that its opening was towards them. "Tuck him under the belly with this if 'e winna go . . . it's his tender spot," the farmer went on, handing over a pliant ash shoot. "Keep level with where yo' see I've bin."

He said "Gee op!" calmly and without any other encouragement the gelding began trundling the roller again. Flo had to do a little run to catch up. For fifty yards the roller went jauntily, then it turned with a little less speed, and after a hundred yards it was travelling at a most melancholy crawl.

"Gee up; what are you trying to do?" demanded Flo, attempting to drag Colonel quicker. But all he did was hold back till at last the roller barely revolved, and then it stopped. Flo saw Mr. Nadin watching. He made a gesture that could not be mistaken. Without saying anything she brought the

ash stick up smartly under the generous curve of Colonel's belly. He almost fell through his collar and jerked the roller after him as if it were nothing. Flo was only a little less surprised than he was and nearly got the roller over her foot. After that, whenever Colonel showed sign of dallying, the least reminder of the stick was enough. As she approached the willows she felt nervous of the turn, but Colonel knew how to turn all right. He simply sat back on his breeching and screwed the roller round with minimum effort. He moiled some of the grass off, but that he didn't mind; and Flo had no suspicion that he ought not to have done it that way. When she faced to the house the farmer had gone. She changed sides so that she could keep watch better that the roller did not overlap too much the part that was already done. She noticed how vivid the contrast of the greens was; dark on the strips like the one they had just finished where the grass was bent towards her, light on the alternate strips where the grass leaned away. Colonel nodded on, not as fast as he had done at first, but steadily, as if he had accepted her, and she had time to glance back and notice that then all the strips were different, the dark ones light, and the light turned dark. It was so simple, yet it surprised and pleased her, and she decided to tell her mother about it in her next letter.

She thought how much better it was walking down the field than being steamed in the wash-house. Mrs. Nadin hadn't seemed to care much when she had stayed before, so perhaps she would not mind this time; and no doubt Mr. Nadin would soon come back. Therefore Flo gave herself to the morning and felt something of the fertile promise of the earth. It was not nearly all new grass yet, but the new spikes that there were stood up with tender eagerness that even Flo could recognize. Colonel occasionally clicked his hoofs as if even he felt gay now that he had really got going. They approached the hedge. A thrush was in an alder which had brown catkins, like frilling, hanging on the branches. The thrush had its breast towards the sun as if proud of his speckled front and his beak opened to the limit and the feathers moved on his blown-out throat. The girl and the horse and everyone else he ignored. Flo stared, amused and happy, because she had never seen a bird so close so engrossed

with song. Colonel slowed without instruction and stopped with his nose just over the hedge. Flo started at a familiar voice.

"Yo're non keepin' straight," it said. "Making th' job spin out, I reckon."

She peeped over and almost level saw Jack Knight on the near side of his float. He smiled. His fair hair stood up in front amusingly.

"Better than washin'-up, eh?" he asked, grinning, big white teeth showing.

"Better than washing, anyway," she agreed, smiling back, aware of the thrush still singing.

"Better'n lots o' jobs; best job as there is in spring."

She patted Colonel's neck.

"The old man about?"

"He was here not many minutes since . . . in the field."

"I'll call, then. Didn't want to if he werena about."

"What . . . what did you do with the calf?" asked Flo, again seeing its pathetic puzzled look when it was made prisoner up to the neck.

"That's what I come ta pay for," he answered, "an' I've brought th' sack."

"Was it . . . was it killed?" she asked.

"Nay, it's a good un; it's a doer," he said, his face sober, his tone impressive. "I'm keepin' it. You conna feed owt as winna eat, but yon mon . . . 'e'll eat everythin'. I like them sort."

She was relieved, but did not like to say so.

"'E'll make good beef, that mon will," said Jack. "Ah well, ta-ta the noo; see you some more."

"What? That's funny," said Flo. "I never heard that before."

"It's what they say in Scotland; in Edinburgh, anyway." He laughed gently as if remembering something particularly pleasant.

"I like it. Ta-ta the noo; see you . . . see you . . ."

"Some more," he finished for her. They smiled together. Jack gave the reins a toss and his piebald nag scraped a stone away with its off forefoot and then started. Flo had to walk round the roller to Colonel's off side. She could see Jack's

head going along the hedge top; it was funny, no body and no horse. She laughed and gave a tug to Colonel's bit. He held back, but a touch with the ash switch made him quickly change his mind. They went clankingly towards the lake once more and now she saw someone waiting just within the willows. There was a rather dazzling gleam behind him, but she knew that it was Bert. She wondered if he had seen her standing with Jack Knight, and whether it mattered.

"The old man's caught you, eh?" he asked, and at once Colonel stopped comfortably, as if it had been an order.

"He's just gone in for a minute or two," said Flo.

Bert smiled sarcastically. He had a gun balanced over his right wrist and under his armpit, both his hands resting comfortably in the cross-pockets of his breeches. A little breeze came through the willows off the water and blew her dress out from her, tightening it down her left front and she knew that he was noticing. She looked away and turned a little sideways.

"I just want ta tell you," he said seriously, "if ever you see anyone about here as you think shouldn't be . . . anyone in the withies, or anywhere . . . let me know. There's a young brat from Netherside as is allus tryin' his tricks.

"Tricks?" repeated Flo.

"After fish an' ducks an' owt else; but 'e'll catch summat as he doesn't want if I get my hands on him."

"Oh," said Flo. Bert's lean lips had gone together and his weathered face looked strong and attractive. She had not noticed it indoors as she did now.

"There's a hundred or so ducks nest here, an' they want some looking after," he told her.

"I'd better be getting on," she said, still conscious of the wind's play and of his steady observation.

"It's a weary job, eh? Why don't you sit on an' let Colonel do the work?"

"How?" she asked, thinking of the trouble she had had at first.

"Reins," he answered. "No good wearing your feet out. Damn walking, if there's chance ta ride."

His hands searched and he lifted from his left pocket a wad of binder string. Having leaned his double-barrel against a

willow stole he unbuckled the bridle rein from over the hames and tied one end of the string to each length of leather. There was just enough. He showed her where to sit on the frame at the side and told her that she would make it roll better. "More weight," he explained with a wink.

She hastily called on Colonel to start. He put a hoof forward tentatively, then drew it back.

"Gee up, you lazy owd sod," ordered Bert shying a walnut-sized stone at his ribs.

The gelding started so briskly that Flo nearly fell backward. Only the loop of binder string saved her, and her unexpected tug on it caused Colonel to stop as abruptly as he had set off.

"Get yer!" threatened Bert, and the gelding restarted, but at an angle of thirty degrees. "Dunna let 'im run off with you," called Bert, enjoying it.

In her flurry she pulled the wrong side and Colonel veered more. She tugged the other way harder than she knew, and the gelding came back in a short curve, almost a circle. She had lost the edge of the previous strip and didn't know which way to turn. In an effort to straighten out she pulled on both reins together and Colonel began to back. The shafts rose at the collar to the length of the hame chains and the whole frame tilted, so that she very nearly slid off the back a second time, giving an extra tug on the reins which made Colonel back more energetically. Before Flo could recover the roller was over the edge and ran crackingly into the willows. This time she fell off. Colonel sat back in the breeching very comfortable. Bert grinned more than ever.

"You munna do it like that," he teased.

"I shall walk," said Flo, feeling fooled. She brushed at the moss and soil on her frock and wished that he hadn't seen her. He caught Colonel's bit and coaxed him on to the level. Flo following saw the foolish track she had made.

"Here, drive along the last mark," he said nodding.

"I'd sooner walk," she said.

"Don't be daft; riding's better. Pull this side when you want him to go this way, and t'other side when . . ."

"I know," said Flo coldly.

She settled on the frame again and there was no more trouble. The roller swayed and bumped a little, but the slight

discomfort was more than made up by the increased feeling of mastery over Colonel which the reins gave her. She was away from his great hooves, and he no longer overshadowed her. Really it was rather fun being trundled over the grass. Her pleasure was upset by an angry whistle. Colonel stopped. Mrs. Nadin was at the yard gate impatiently waving.

"Come 'ere . . . what d'you mean?" came faintly but imperatively over the grass.

Colonel was still a hundred yards from the hedge.

"Leave 'im," came a more angry shout.

"What the hell are you doin'?" demanded Mrs. Nadin as Flo walked up. "I guess the bloody old fool set you on, eh? I'm boss here, an' dunna forget it. *He* wouldna care if his shirt cracked wi' muck. Bring the wisket. Manglin's waitin'. If you slip off agen, I'll tansel you."

Flo at the gate gave a last doubtful glance to Colonel. His nose had dropped almost to his knees and he looked already asleep. When she went out twenty-five minutes later with a basket of vests and pants and stockings he was still there as settled as a statue. But she dared not go to him. She wondered if Bert knew, and then almost at the same moment she heard a shot from past the boat-house somewhere. She looked but could not see him. After she had been back in the wash-house five minutes she ventured to ask if it was all right leaving Colonel.

"Why the heck not?" demanded Mrs. Nadin tartly. "If 'e conna look after him, let 'im stond."

When Flo went out with the last batch, dusters and spare miscellaneous cloths, Colonel had gone and the roller was by the barn end with its shafts tilted at the milky blue sky. When Mr. Nadin came in for dinner Flo expected a row, but he sat without a word. Mrs. Nadin put his steaming mutton stew down out of the oven with a, "Tek that an' dunna brun thiself like a babby", and Colonel was never mentioned.

Chapter 11

FLO felt sorry for Mr. Nadin. However Mrs. Nadin stormed he so seldom answered back. He was not exactly meek, but he absorbed everything that she said with

a kind of independent resignation. If Mrs. Nadin was upstairs or in the outhouses and Mr. Nadin came in late for his afternoon cup of tea, Dot sometimes would say :

“ If you can’t come in to time, you deserve to do without.”

“ Keep your lip to yourself,” he would answer quietly, but with unmistakable authority.

Flo liked it. But why didn’t he do the same to Mrs. Nadin?

The abandonment of Colonel was only one of many somewhat similar happenings. Flo soon got into the habit of trying to help the farmer all she could. She thought that he needed help; and more important to herself, though she did not admit it, she preferred working out-of-doors.

The boys did not do much. Bert was perfunctory towards farm work; Clem was lazy. The only thing that he liked was going off in the trap with Job. Where he went to most times Flo did not know; and she was often in bed when she heard the clatter of hooves and the rolling of the iron-tyred wheels. Then she would lie till she heard his stockinged tread and saw the yellow candle light in a broad bar beneath her door. She watched its brilliance rise up the side cracks, then grow dim and disappear as Clem went along the landing. Perhaps it was foolish, but she did not feel at ease till he had climbed the stairs and gone. There was no lock or bolt, and it would be so simple for him to walk in. Otherwise Flo soon got to like her room. It was the one place where she could get away effectively from Mrs. Nadin’s perpetual harsh talk; where she could feel that she had a little part of life still her own. There, in silence only faintly disturbed occasionally by the sleepy cheep of a sparrow under the stone-slatted eaves, or the sly running of mice somewhere in the walls or beams, and in steady friendly candle light she wrote home. From there she tried to tell her mother what her new life was like :

“ If only it wasn’t so far from you, it would be alright.

I don’t like Dot. She’s stuck up and no mistake, but I wish Ivy could see some of the things she has. Not that they’re any better than mine, really, tell Mrs. Howell. The only thing is I don’t get much time to wear them. Saturday and Sunday we feed men who come to catch fishes in the lake, though they don’t much. Monday is wash-day, and the ironing we have in the afternoon!

You'd go dotty, but we get through. Tuesday . . . well, I'm not going to go over everything. But I should get some time off, shouldn't I? . . . I don't like asking, because Mrs. isn't the sort you can ask much, though she's not too bad when you get used. Talks and talks *and* talks, and quite funny at times. Sets on to Mr. Nadin something awful, but don't tell Mrs. Howell. I wish she'd set on to Dot as she does on to him. I think that's all this time, but I'll write again. How's town looking? I can't think it's still there, it's so different here. If you see Mrs. Mawson in the market, tell her I'm doing what she said. She'll know what. I love you, Mother. Good night and lots of XXXXXX.

Next morning Flo asked Dot where she could post the letter.

"What tales have you been telling?"

"Nothing," said Flo.

"Bert'll post it . . . if he can remember," said Dot. She stood a moment hesitating, then walked to the fireplace.

Bert said, "Ay, I'll non forget," and slipped the envelope into his right-hand pocket. This was Flo's second letter. She thought of Mrs. Mawson telling her to stick up for herself, and wondered whether asking about a half-day off would come under what her friend had meant. Only there was always so much to do that Flo did not like asking. But Mrs. Nadin might have been able to pick up her thoughts for on the second Thursday morning, while Flo was peeling potatoes, Mrs. Nadin said: "I reckon you're like all the rest an' want ta goo sky-larkin' a bit?"

"How d'you mean?"

"Bit o' time off a'ter the lads. There'll be noo folk if there's noo courtin'. When you've washed up, happen we'll manage 'bout you after dinner."

But it was three before Flo got upstairs to change. Only now that she was free she had no idea where to go. Her brief ride from the station through Moss had not left a very attractive memory. It seemed a long walk there if there was nothing more than she had already seen. She leaned on the window sill and looked across the valley to where on the hill were other farms, small and grey, each with its sheltering group of sycamores or ash trees. She got her father's glasses, and these

seemed to bring the farms closer, but that was all. In any of these farmhouses there might be a girl of her own age free for the afternoon, not knowing what to do. But how could they get to know each other? Was there no market where they could meet? Flo wondered. Why hadn't she asked?

Anyway, she could dress in her best. There was no telling what might happen. So she started to change. She had to go down again to wash at the sink. There was no one in the kitchen, but as she was drying herself she heard Clem on the flags. She hid her shoulders with the towel, as a cape, and dashed for the door. He had just opened the outer door which she had shut. He grinned, and as she turned he caught the towel and gave it a tug. The corner nearest to him was dragged out of her clutch and fell down her back, but she ran on up the passage, hearing his laugh. After dressing she listened acutely, trying to decide whether he was still in the kitchen, but no sound came. She took a last look into the glass. Because she could not see the hem of her skirt she had to put the chair in front of the dressing-table and stand on it. She was satisfied and hoped that there would be someone nice to see her. She felt just as smart as the first time when she tried the costume on. She hadn't had any money so far, but part of her things were paid for, anyway, and she wondered which part. She thought that it would be a good plan to decide each half-day, if she got them regular, what it was that she had worked for that week, and what she was going to work for in the next week. She decided that the first thing she would pay off would be the blouse, but how much of it was represented by the week—no, ten days—which she had already worked? Had she bought the front or the back, or only a sleeve, say? This was a problem she could not answer, and she frowned as she lifted her skirt to step down. She wished that she had been told how much each of the things had cost; all she knew was that Mrs. Howell had told her that she would have to work at least six months before she could expect to get more than a very little pocket-money. Flo frowned more as she thought going down the stairs. How nice it would be when she really began to earn and could send something home!

She was upset to find Clem leaning in the back doorway.

He turned and said that if she was going into Moss he'd take her. He was going with the float.

"I'm not going into Moss; I'm going the other way," said Flo.

She felt like turning back up the stairs, but she forced herself to walk on. As she stepped out he heaved his weight off the door post and went on with her.

"Got a date already, eh? You'll get lost," he said in a teasing drawl.

She ignored him.

"Not coming?" he asked again, quizzingly, as they got to the float.

She walked on feeling annoyed and foolish. She heard him say, "She won't have us, Job. We're jilted!" The back of her neck burned with her cheeks, and she knew he must be able to see it under her turban and would be laughing. At the gate she turned abruptly rightward, but the wall was not high enough to hide her and she walked on stiffly, looking straight in front. The float rattled over the yard and she heard it craunch round in the lane. She was tempted to look back to make sure that it was going the other way, only she knew that Clem might still be watching. However, the sounds went fainter and she slowed to a saunter. The road went straight for a quarter mile, then disappeared to the left of some thorn bushes. She had not the least idea where it led. A hundred yards from the yard gate the wall on the right ended. She was past the house and the cabin and the hawthorns by which the boat-house was sheltered and unexpectedly she came to a wide open space and saw the lake broadspread. It was a mile long and half a mile across, and seen from there seemed to fill the valley. There was a gradual slope of coarse grass and scattered sedge tufts, then a strip of low-growing weeds of a kind that could survive periodic drownings, and finally an edge of clayey silt and stones. She walked down, drawn as a child would have been, and the nearer to the water she got the farther and wider the lake seemed to spread. A pleasant breeze was coming from the west down the length of the lake, raising little waves that splashed along the strand, tossing tiny beads of spray towards her shoes as if inviting her to play. It was so very like the sea that for a moment

she imagined herself back on the coast at Aldingham, looking across Morecambe bay. The breeze blew away the hotness from her cheeks and seemed to cleanse her and she breathed in deeply, coolness spreading under her breasts, till she felt buoyant and wanted to run. She turned leftwards and started to walk briskly just out of reach of the breaking water. The sound was lifted to her; it was a gentle, friendly sound, friendly as the prattle of children. Fifty yards along the land went out in a curving sweep rightward. A brake of hawthorns, low-growing alders and bramble mounds hid her from the road, and she felt free and ran for twenty yards till she suddenly thought of Bert. Perhaps he was in the bushes somewhere. He always seemed to be somewhere near the lake. She stopped and looked round, but there was nothing, only the lapping water and the bushes and the sky. In front a ridge rose just high enough to hide everything beyond. This was the backbone of the point which formed the bay round which she was going. She went on to the tip of the point and looked into the west with the breeze, and the little waves flowing all round, as it seemed. The continual hurry of the waves gave her the impression of moving forward into them as in the prow of a boat. The sensation pleased her and she stood there five minutes, feeling pink coming into her cheeks. On her left behind the point the lake ended in a pear-shaped lagoon, three hundred yards long and at its widest part two hundred yards. Across to the opposite shore from where she stood was about one hundred and fifty yards, and she noticed what she thought was a curious thing. Far out the waves ran independently, tossing, slapping, and sometimes falling over one another, but as they approached the lagoon entrance there was an increasing orderliness; they went together inexplicably into continuous swells which moved into the opening in bow formation, each swell about two feet behind its forerunner. These swells or regular corrugations were higher than any of the individual waves farther out. The fore part of the bow passed into the lagoon first at the centre of the entrance, the ends of the swells lagging slightly along the shores. The swells had a brave look, as if they were determined to overwhelm everything, and then twenty yards within the lagoon they seemed to forget. They lost

their robustness and became smaller and smaller, till forty yards past the point they were simply ripples which meekly smoothed themselves into the untroubled stillness of the far end. There Flo saw as the stalk of the lagoon pear a stream which came in between banks green with spring freshness. A quarter-mile away the little valley was shut in by a ridge grown with larches just beginning to tint, as if some of the dye of the grass had been taken up by their roots. The larches stood above the ridge against the sky, reminding Flo of pictures of the Canadian Rockies; but this was smaller, more friendly and pretty. Then she shortened her gaze to the left of the lagoon. Near where the stream came in the bank went up twenty feet or more, almost into a cliff, though all grass, topped with rough hawthorns and hollies. Flo's gaze following the ridge hesitated all at once. There was something in the dark hollow under the cliff, something which at first she could not make out. Concentrating, she saw a man apparently sitting down, so that after all she had not been alone. She had been watched and she felt resentful; by his mere presence he had somehow spoiled the whole scene and experience. She turned, intending to walk to the road by the way that she had come. Her instinct was to ignore the stranger, but the narrowness of the point compelled her during the first twenty yards very nearly straight in his direction, and she could not close her eyes to him. He was waving, not in greeting, but signalling urgently with bent arm which he drew towards himself. She was struck by his otherwise static attitude. It seemed unnatural. On reaching the place where she should have gone down the ridge leftward out of his view she paused doubtfully. There was a slight lull in the rush of breeze, and a shout reached her, not as any particular word, but an appeal of some kind. What could he want?

The lagoon which had been friendly and pleasant seemed lonely now. It would be wiser to walk away and get on the public road. She half turned, then heard a more urgent shout. He beckoned again, and she began to walk slowly round the lagoon, intending to dodge into the bushes at any suspicious move. For the first part of the way the shore curve took her rather farther from him. Then the inlet of a stream five feet across made her seek round through the bushes. She

scrambled up a mound and was diverted by sprawling brambles. When she saw the light of the open lakeside again she was closer to the stranger than she had expected. She stopped just in the hiding of a blackthorn shrub whose last flowers looked drab, as if they had mistaken their time of blooming. Unintentionally her left hand touched one of the sharp spikes. When she snatched it away a blood prick showed on the ball of the first finger. She raised her hand at the same time leaning forward. The finger never got to her mouth, for what she saw made her start impulsively from cover. The fall of the ground helped her into a run, and she went with the wind, nearly as fast, so that it felt no longer fresh but warm with her. Soon she was under the beginning of the grassy cliff.

"Careful!" came a warning shout. She slowed to walking pace and studied him as she advanced. The chair, of brown basketing, was near the centre of an oval flat between cliff and shore, and the rims of the wheels were four inches under the clayey surface. The man appeared young, about twenty-five, Flo guessed, and had a sallow rectangular face and towed hair, dark peat colour. He sat very broad in the chair facing her and smiled disparagingly. "Better not come any closer," he advised gruffly when she was at the edge of the flat, and still twenty paces off. "If you'd go and fetch Bert . . . Bert Nadin . . . though, I'd be glad."

"Why . . . can't I help?" Flo asked, breathing fast.

"You'll mucky yourself to blazes," he said, his voice very deep with a kind of caressing quality, his eyes going down momentarily to her shoes. "I ought to have had more sense, the number of times I've been . . . but I thought it looked all right." He held up his hands, palms towards her. Brown mud blotched them all over. "That's what you'll get if you come."

His legs looked shrunken. They gave her a feeling of horror, coupled with a more powerful feeling of pity. Without considering what he had said she stepped forward impulsively on to the bare brown patch. Instantly her heel went in. Just under the apparently dry surface there was a layer of nearly liquid mud. She slipped and precariously recovered. She held her legs stiffly as if she was on ice.

"I told you; you should go for Bert," he said sympathetically.

But it was absurd to go back when he was so short a distance away. She did not reply, but went on again gingerly.

"I doubt whether you'll be able to do it; it's like glue," he said, as she put her hands on the chair back. It was a quiet comment in which she felt that he also expressed thanks. His towled hair was just below her. There was a faint golden gloss in the depth of the brownness.

"Which way," he asked, "on or back? Which can you manage best?"

"Push, I think."

"You'll probably manage pulling better," he suggested, though not insisting.

"Push," she ordered and put her weight against the handle. His hands closed broadly on the wooden hand-wheels which were outside the ordinary wheels and of a somewhat smaller circumference. The chair moved a little. Flo strained against it. Unexpectedly both her feet slipped and she held on to save herself.

"We're digging in; better try backward," he advised. "You shouldn't . . ."

"I don't know whether I can stand backward," she said, laughing rather uncertainly.

"If I come over on you, you'll know about it," he said, laughing also, but in a way that calmed her. "I've been in this mess before; it's not as simple as it looks."

"It's only about a couple of yards this way," she said hopefully, looking if there was more solid footing anywhere. A stone as big as her fist attracted her and she set her sole against it testingly, but after very slight pressure it skidded, leaving a greasy trail. "What horrid stuff," she exclaimed.

"Yes; you shouldn't have bothered," he said at once with regret, taking all blame. "I shouldn't have waved, only I must have been here an hour."

"An hour! Try again," she ordered, resuming charge.

He leaned and gripped the hand-wheels low down. Flo turned partly sideways to get the purchase of the full length of her shoes. The wheels made a quarter turn reluctantly. All

at once she felt the weight of the chair towards her increase alarmingly. With a violent effort she threw it back. It poised for a moment, on balance, then fell to normal.

"I thought it was a gonner," he said quietly and chuckled; but Flo trembled. "It's always liable to tip. You should pull on the lower handle; it's more awkward, but it's best," he said as though apologizing.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking down on him.

They tried again. When they pulled together the wheels turned slowly and crept back. When he leaned to shift his grip the chair felt immovable. She got into waiting and pulling with him. As they got farther back the ground was drier, and at last she could move the chair unaided. The wheels ran on to a patch of dwarfed weed. She stopped, realizing that she did not know now in which direction he wanted to go. Immediately he manipulated adroitly round to face her.

"Look at your shoes; too bad," he said. There was grave politeness and a genuineness that pleased her. "I thought you weren't going to come, though. I waved and waved and shouted . . ."

"It must have been the wind and the water; I never heard," she explained, wondering whether she ought to leave him, yet not wanting to. "Which way?"

"No; you've done enough. I'll take more care, thanks. I should have had more sense, anyway."

He looked again at her shoes and asked if she had far to go.

"Only there," she nodded in the direction of the farm.

"Prettyfield! How is it I've never seen you?" he asked.

"I'm one of Bert's regulars."

"I've only just come. It's the first time I've been by the water."

"It's a great place, don't you think?" His glance circled slowly and appreciatively. While his attention was away she looked quickly at his square chin which held an unusual V-shaped dimple, in which short dark hairs sprouted. His brows were thick and met, making a straight black bar under the high forehead. His eyes came back and caught her scrutiny. Hastily she looked over his head, down the water. There was silence, ended by his unhurried, husky speech

"I don't know what I'd do without here to come to. Do you fish?"

"No," she answered. "It always seems so . . . so slow. If you ever caught anything . . ."

"That shows . . . It isn't what you catch, it's the doing that matters . . . like with so many other things. So long as I'm here, I don't mind. I like to be by the water and to see the hills."

"Yes," said Flo, liking his voice.

"Things get on top of you, sometimes, you know. That's when I get away here, if I can. I'd only just put my rod up." He let his right hand fall on the brown canvas cover tucked by his side. "I haven't caught anything to-day . . . got caught myself instead, eh?"

"If I'd kept on the road you'd still be there," said Flo. He smiled agreement, and she began to wipe her shoes on the weed. To get the thick of the mud off he offered a knife with a handle of brown corrugated horn and a worn blade. She crouched and scraped awkwardly, knowing his steady watching.

"Put it here," he invited, touching the edge of the footrest.

"My hands are as doesn't matter; and it's my fault."

"I can manage," she answered.

"You won't let me pay you back anyway?"

"It was nothing. I thought I'd go all round. Is there a way?"

"Yes," he said, willingly. "I'd show you, but I only get along this side . . . and not always that." He smiled ruefully. "But if you go far enough there's a bridge." He pointed towards the larches and let his arm circle, indicating the opposite woods and the far end of the lake in turn. "And back by the main road."

Flo wiped the knife. As she gave it to him she was struck by the paleness of the inside of his hand in contrast with the brown back. She wondered what he did; if he worked at all.

"Sure you can manage? Suppose you sink again?" she asked.

"I won't. Once bitten, twice shy . . . like a fish. Once it's escaped, he'll be a good man to catch it again." He paused and turned the chair towards the water. "You see

where I came; should have kept nearer the edge. There must be a spring under that patch."

"If you'll be all right then . . ."

"Ever so many thanks again. Tell Bert you've been talking to Dick Goldbourn."

"Yes," said Flo. She hesitated before starting to walk across the remainder of the flat. Then there was a bank. From the top she looked back. Dick Goldbourn had not moved. He waved and impelled her to wave an answer. She wondered if he had always been like that and felt sorry for him. There was just the suggestion of a path in front. It took her up the shallow valley by the stream that was the stalk of the lagoon. Fifty yards from the head of the lagoon there were alders and willows by the water and the path went to a narrow wooden bridge beneath them. Bending rightward the path then led back towards the lake, but took her a good stone-throw away from the stream and higher up, and here, surprisingly, she found a second stream, clearer, quicker-flowing, man-guided, though the banks had long ago become grown with grass and flowering plants, thorn bushes and occasional goat willows, ash trees and small oaks. This stream's remaining mark of artificiality was its straightness. Flo did not bother trying to think why it had been made, because there was a sudden circled disturbance of the surface and the skimming away of a shadow which she guessed must be a fish. Although she peered hard under the far bank where it seemed to have gone, all that she saw was a little flurry of fine particles start up and float away. She wondered if it was the kind of fish that Mr. Goldbourn would have liked to have caught. She looked round. There he was half a mile distant close by the lake edge, resting as it seemed. Realizing that she was still in his view should he glance round, she went on more quickly to the wood's shelter. The clear stream ran into the wood under a thick ash bough, recently barked and creamy white. The stile was high and let Flo down behind a family of old hollies, all grown together as with arms and cloaks round one another. Here the path was a narrow causeway between spiney leaves and the water. She sidled past, her back to the hollies, and noticed how the water, over-arched also by alder trees from the far side, seemed to run

more gently, as if it had grown older all at once. Shadow had taken away the surface gloss so that she could see every grey and brown and black pebble, and every stick and rooting of moss or weed as if she were looking through a magnifying glass. Beyond the hollies stream and path went companionably down a long clear corridor interlaced above, and at the sides shut in by ivied oak trunks and thorn bushes, by hazel and wild rose shoots tied with dead-looking honeysuckle binders which nevertheless had started proud little sage-green leaf tufts at hand-span intervals all along their length. On the right by the edge of the path the ground fell steeply, and Flo saw through boughs and twigs the gleam of the lake. Behind an ivy-muffled oak trunk she stopped. Dick Goldbourn was moving on. He seemed absorbed in picking a track, and went on slowly as if the obstructions to the wheels were many. Flo felt contrite at not having stayed. She left the path, scrambling down the bank, and went to the edge of the bushes. The water lay only five feet from them. There was a sense of intimacy in watching him across its surface, for she was by the top end of the lagoon where the swell was down to little more than a suggestion of shadows following one another. Though she could hear the wind, it was only a faint sighing at the back of the wood behind her, and she imagined that without raising her voice she could have spoken across to him. She forgot regret in trying to remember all that had happened. More than anything she had been impressed by his quiet courtesy. "A real gentleman," she summed him up.

He was wheeling carefully up the land that dwindled to the point where she had stood. He was taking the rise diagonally and half-way up changed direction, unexpectedly facing partly to her. She stepped back flustered, and wrongly imagined the shelter of the hastily accepted thorn bush to be very slight. He paused and seemed to gaze straight at her. She wondered at her foolishness in coming so near the edge. While she hesitated between stopping there or making a dash for the oak he began to labour again and rolled slowly up the bank on his new tack. Then he was at the top, and she saw him coast from view. Nevertheless she stayed on, knowing that he must show again as he travelled to the road. Only when

he was safely on the macadam did she climb back to the path. He was still in her thoughts when she reached the dam at the foot of the lake.

Chapter 12

FLO was diffident about mentioning to Bert anything about Dick Goldbourn. There were, indeed, very few chances, Bert staying out nearly every day now. She gathered that it was because of the wild duck in the willows. There were at least fifty pairs, Bert said one dinner-time. Even after dusk Bert stayed out, and many a night Flo never heard him come in. Often in the mornings, too, he was out before she got down. He seemed not to bother about the farm work at all. Clem went on in the same easy way, generally late down, off for two and three hours when he took the milk, and Flo felt sorrier and sorrier for Mr. Nadin who was always busy. Whenever she got chance she slipped out to help him. She stood by the water-trough while Colonel drank after being unharnessed from the cart, and then took him into the stable. She began to feed the calves regularly and took on the feeding of the pigs and the poultry, whose cabin was at the back of the barn away from the road. She was scattering maize for them one evening while Mr. Nadin loaded the red cart from the midden which was a little closer to the lane, when Dick Goldbourn came up and stopped at the open gate. The farmer straightened and asked if he had had any luck. Dick bent and held up by the tail a pike nearly three feet long. The farmer dug his fork in and went to inspect the fish. Flo, wondering where he was going, turned to stare, and saw Dick beckoning. For a moment she ignored the signal, then went towards him. Mr. Nadin was hefting the fish in his right hand.

"What d'you think of that, eh?" asked Dick. "Who said I never caught anything?"

Flo stared at the monster's blue and silver bars, and at its cruel jaws. It seemed to have died with a snarl and she wondered how he had managed to land it.

"Fishing wasn't slow when I hooked that, I'll tell you," said Dick with a twinkle of pride.

Flo thought how boyish he looked, much younger than when she had been with him before. His front hair had got blown up or pushed up into an absurd tuft suggesting a miniature palm tree.

"I bet he's put some trout into his guts," said the farmer. "Twelve pounds, eh?"

"Shouldn't wonder. I looked out for Bert, but he wasn't about."

"Ay, he's a right old cannibal; Bert'll be glad."

"Cannibal?" said Flo.

"Ay, he's eaten anythin' he could get, that mon," said the farmer, putting the pike back on the chair footrest.

After a little talk on the long dry spell they had had Dick turned his chair back to the road. "'E wasna allus like that," said the farmer as he went back with Flo. "Got sunstroke when he was a youngster an' it paralysed 'im."

"I don't know how he can catch fish like that," said Flo.

"Surprisin' what he con do," said the farmer, stopping with his hand on the fork handle. "Most chaps 'ud be full o' grumbles if they was like 'im. He's just lucky, 'e's got plenty o' brass, so 'e doesna need ta worry"

"Isn't it dangerous him going so much by the water?"

"Eh, I dunna know what 'e'd do 'bout fishin'. . . . 'E gets stuck now an' then, but non often."

"I helped him the other day," said Flo.

The farmer spat on each palm in turn. "I thought 'e seemed ta know you. 'E's a good straight chap, is Dick." With his foot, the farmer shoved the fork prongs deep in and levered backward. The muck broke away with a sucking, and Flo went back to scatter the remaining corn from the scoop. In their eagerness some of the hens pecked her boots, but she was thinking of the wheeled chair going up the bank out of the valley. If he came so often, then he would be used to it, though it must be a hard climb. She wondered if he had far to go. Where did he live? What an awful thing for the sun to make a cripple. She decided to take care if ever she had to go out in the hay.

They were all sitting eating supper of currant-bread and sage cheese when Mr. Nadin remembered the pike.

"If it didna weigh twelve pounds, I'm damned."

"You're damned all reet then," said Clem. "There's no twelve-pounder ever come out o' that puddle."

"I dunno," Bert put in. "I was a good way off—at the point—but I saw it landed."

"'E wastes enough time theer. It's time 'e caught summat. 'E were lucky ta get left wi' some brass," said Mrs. Nadin.

"It's a wonder someone doesn't marry him for it, cripple or no cripple," said Dot. "Though I'd want something more than him, even with money."

"He's a quiet decent enough chap. If there was none worst nor Dick it wouldna be so bad." The farmer looked up from his plate for a moment and as he happened to be sitting opposite Flo, she saw his eyes grey and steady.

"Ay, he's awreet, is Dick," Bert confirmed. "I reckon he'd never have landed yon pike though, if there hadna happened to ha' bin Jack Knight theer. He was in th'float an' Dick shouted . . ."

"They'd mek a good pair," Mrs. Nadin said harshly. "If Jack were lad o' mine I'd have him tek reg'lar work."

"He con work when he's a mind," Bert said. "It's just that he likes truckin' . . ."

"Ay, I was up by his place an' the junk 'e's got there, it's surprisin'." Clem stopped to pick out of his mouth a tiny hard black nodule which had somehow got into the bread in place of a currant. "What the hell done you call that?" he demanded. "Damn near broke me tooth."

"There'd non 'a bin much loss if it had choked thee," said Mrs. Nadin promptly.

"Ay, I heeard as he'd bought that there shed o' Marley's, an' all as there were in it. What's 'e goin' ta do wi' it?" asked Mr. Nadin looking towards Clem.

"Goin' in for market gardenin', or summat. They say as 'e's goin' ta mek a greenhouse. There's a tidy bit o' wood piled in th' yard there, anyway."

"See owt o' Barbara?" asked Mrs. Nadin. "They reckon oo's non likely to get about agen."

"I heard it was cancer in the throat," said Dot. "They wrote for Inez to come, but she wouldn't . . . that's what they say."

"She's school-teachin', isna she?"

"Yes; somewhere near London."

"It's non many 'ud do as Jack's doing," said Bert. "I reckon lookin' after her is one o' the reasons as 'e canna tek a reg'lar job. Of course, he's fond of a gab. 'E were comical wi' that there fish. It didna fight as much as you'd 'a thought, an' Dick had it to the side. Jack come runnin' an' grabbed the landin' net an' were mekkin' a put for it when 'is feet slipped. I bet 'e pickèd up some mud on 'is backside."

"That wouldna worry 'im," commented Mrs. Nadin, getting off her chair with a single swift movement and reaching the brown tea-pot off the hob.

"'E didna waste much time, anyway. 'E were up in a jiff an' had it. Twelve pounds doesna sound too much ta me; it were as long as my arm."

"There's non many fish as gets caught out o' theer as isna as long as your arm," commented Clem, pushing his plate away.

Bert got up and went for an ash stick out of the corner farthest from the fire. "If you'd caught it it 'ud aweighed twenty pounds," he said drily. The ash stick had a heavy knob handle carved out of the root. He hefted it like a club and then went out.

"I'm tekkin' Emmott to Manchester to-morrow," said Mrs. Nadin, surprising Flo. "Dunna you an' Dot be knockin' yeads together; an' dunna forget as there's some work ta get through. You'd best be up early. We'll side this lot, then off you go."

Flo was glad to get to her room. She put the candle out of draught close against the wall, on the drawers, and then sat on the window-sill as was becoming a habit. She questioned whether Bert could see her, but it didn't matter. She thought again about the big fish and wondered if she would have dared to have landed it had Dick Goldbourn called her for that instead of to help him out of the mud. Jack Knight hadn't been afraid. She laughed softly as she imagined him sitting down unexpectedly. Did it scare the fish, or was it too weary and beaten? she wondered. This saddened her, and she began to think of the woman lying with cancer in her throat. Was it Jack's mother, or who? She would try to remember to ask. Then she thought of her own mother, and as she did so, turned her eyes up to the stars. They were very

tiny, very far off, but mother and Ivy seemed even farther off. If only she could see them like that; as tiny as could be, like looking down the wrong end of the opera glasses, yet there, that would do. At least, then she would know that they were all right. Now she knew nothing. They might be dead; they might . . . ough! She jerked herself up and let the dark blue rocker blind down and began to undress. As she lay in the dark with the blind rolled up again she heard Clem pad past. He seemed to pause outside her door, but perhaps it was only her imagining. Then she stared at a dim solitary star and felt lonely and sad. She had been at Prettyfield three weeks, and felt that she knew what life she could expect. A lot of the work was hard, but that she didn't mind; some of it was interesting, and that she liked. The Nadins had accepted her, and generally they were all right. But she felt somehow that their attitude would remain always the same. She was accepted, but she was not quite one of them and never would be. Was it always like that in service? she pondered. When she had worked in the offices of the Thistle Trust Limited there had been a comradeship with the other girls, which was lacking here. If only she could find a friend nearby, then perhaps it would be all right, and yet at home she had never had any one special friend; only somehow there everybody had been friendly. At least, she had felt that they were; no doubt because they talked in the same way, and were familiar with the same streets and shops and places. But here she felt out of place, alien. Her view of the solitary star became blurred and suddenly she dragged the sheet over her face, muffling herself in close darkness. She thought that she would never sleep, but she lost consciousness without difficulty, almost at once.

In the morning there was bustle. Mrs. Nadin sent her to help with milking at once. At half-past six when they were only two-thirds through, Mrs. Nadin poked her round head over the shippon door and called: "Emmott, thee come an' get thi breeches on," just as if he were a child. The lanky farmer finished his cow, then got up obediently.

"Ma's goin' ta keep her eye on 'im, but oo'll have a job," said Clem, looking round the back of the roan polly cow he was finishing next to Flo.

"How d'you mean . . . he might get lost?"

"He'll get lost if he con, all right," said Clem with a chuckle.

Then Flo and Bert were left while Clem wheeled the float from the open shed at the end of the yard facing the gate and hooked Job in. While Clem was still busy, Mrs. Nadin came out in a navy-blue coat to her ankles and a flat black hat tilted slightly forward because it wouldn't go over the small tight knob of her hair at the back. There was a yellow lily in the hat which bobbed about as she energetically moved her head. Her umbrella was only eighteen inches shorter than she was, and she walked with it as a shepherd walks with a crook. She went round and watched the finishing of the fixing of traces and belly-band as if she doubted whether Clem knew anything about the job. Dot brought one of the wooden kitchen chairs to put in the float and Mrs. Nadin briskly hauled herself in at the back and then sat sternly facing the house.

"Tell that theer mutton-yeard ta be shapin'," she called shrilly after Dot. The two churns were swung in and strapped in place. While Clem went to the house Bert got a brush and tidied Job's mane and forelock. "Where is he?" demanded Mrs. Nadin, looking at Flo. "Goo an' see if 'e's got stuck in 'is porridge or swallowed 'is teacup; 'e's gormless enough fer owt."

Flo set off up the path but at the door she heard the harness jingle and glancing back she saw Mrs. Nadin getting out. Mr. Nadin was placidly chewing. When he saw Flo he winked, stopped chewing to take a swig at his pint pot, and started chewing again.

"Stuffin' your guts!" snapped Mrs. Nadin before Flo could speak. "Yo're the slowest gutser i' Darbyshire. What about the train?"

"I reckon it winna goo before it's time," said the farmer, taking another swig.

"By gum, if I have ta be worried bi you, I'd sooner goo mysen," she retorted, abruptly turning and going out once more, as if afraid now that the float would go without her. Mr. Nadin finished his pot and then leisurely followed. His light grey whipcord suit, nearly skin-tight in the legs, made him appear taller and thinner than ever. Clem went out last,

still chewing. Bert turned Job's head to the gate, and as his shuffle rocked the float fore and aft the yellow lily in Mrs. Nadin's hat seemed to nod good-bye.

"Hast gotten thi hand-bag?" asked Mr. Nadin from his high seat on the float side.

The instant jerk of the lily unmistakably said, "No!" Job stopped willingly to the least signal, and Mrs. Nadin scrambled out almost as if impelled by a spring.

"Where is it?" asked Dot, turning to run. She was coming out of the door with it when she nearly bumped into her mother. Mrs. Nadin tucked the big black bag under her arm in a way that suggested that she never intended to let go of it again. Without thanks she scuttered energetically back and with Bert lifting and Clem hauling she was up in the float again in a jiff. Flo glanced at the farmer, but he seemed to be chewing something and did not even look at his wife. After the float had travelled a score of yards Dot said abruptly:

"You've no time to stand . . . there's the siding and washing."

Flo started.

"Ay, keep her goin' now as you're boss," said Bert in a teasing sarcastic way.

"You do your jobs and I'll do mine without your advice," retorted Dot, turning after Flo.

"Nay, I'd sooner change over; you do my jobs an' I'll look after her," he called.

Dot went through into the front part of the house. Flo thought she must be going to dust. Twenty minutes later she walked briskly back into the kitchen and asked if the washing-up wasn't done yet; there were the bedrooms to do, and all the dusting.

"I can't get dinner and do everything else, you know," she said severely.

Flo realized how it was going to be all day and decided to keep steadily at work without over exerting. She saw Bert occasionally going about the yard, and he didn't seem to be over pushing either. Eventually she saw him walking through the gate with his gun under his arm as usual. The float came back at half-past nine, though Flo had expected that Clem would take most of the day off also. She heard the empty

churns banging as he unloaded, and then Dot called impatiently.

"Yes?" said Flo at the kitchen door.

"I've told you before; you should say, 'Yes, miss'. If I had my way you wouldn't be let do as you like. Go out and wash the cans."

Flo, unprepared, could not quite hide surprise.

"Don't stand there," snapped Dot. "There's the big pan. Carry it out and I'll show you."

The churns, the sieve and the milking buckets all stood abandoned, as it were, by the trough. Flo was told to pour the boiling water into one of the churns, to wash that thoroughly, then to pour the same water into the second churn.

"There'll be some fresh for the sieve at the end," said Dot taking the kettle. "Remember, I can tell if you don't do the job properly; there'll be sour milk."

Flo made a face after her as she went up the path.

"Meow, meow . . . naughty, naughty," said Clem's voice from behind. He was leaning in the stable doorway. "You've bin promoted," he said when Flo looked.

She thrust the short brush into the churn. Only by stretching full length could she reach bottom. Confined by bright metal and shut in by her shoulder the steam was scaldingly hot and almost at once she had to snatch her arm out.

"Rat inside?" asked Clem waggishly. "Once you tek that job, you'll have it for keeps. You should ha' given it her back."

Flo reached in again more circumspectly and swished the water round with vigour. She was aware how foolish she must look with her head almost tucked into the churn. She carefully kept her back from Clem because she knew what he was interested in. Then she found that it was easier if she tilted the churn, letting the water swill up the sides as she rolled the thing on its bottom rim.

"You're learnin'," said Clem.

When she came to pour the water into the next churn she was surprised by the weight. She had a job, then nearly dropped the churn and lost all the water through it splashing up and washing against her hand. Fortunately, though, it

had cooled a bit, and she was able to stand it. After washing everything with the soapy water, she had to swill thoroughly with cold and then wipe everything till the insides at least looked silver bright. It was rather fun scooping water out of the trough and splashing it about. But when she began to wipe the churns her dress got soaked at the knees through leaning against the wet metal, and she felt chilled. Clem stayed against the door-post all the time and at last said: "Non so bad." He strolled across. "If nobody's watchin'," he added as he came closer, "tip 'em up an' let 'em drain; wiping's a waste." He gripped the nearer churn by the top and swung it up, caught the bottom rim with his free hand and upended it at an angle against the wall. "Air gets in that way an' sweetens it . . . so they say," he explained. "When's you're next night out?"

"I don't know," said Flo.

"Don't know! By gum, you want ta tek it. I'll tek you into Buxton one night. What's wrong wi' tanight?"

"No; I can't, without permission."

"Who off . . . our Dot? Leave it ta me."

There was a sound at the door, and Dot's shrill shout reached them: "Haven't you done?"

"No," Clem answered, "she's havin' a talk wi' me. Best do the rest yourself."

"You shut up," snapped Dot, coming down the path. Her quick glance went over the churns and buckets. "Come on," she ordered, as if Clem had vanished. "Potatoes next, then we can feed the brutes."

All morning from one job to another Flo was shifted while Dot walked about, or sat in the front rooms, and occasionally looked into the pans or into the oven. Dinner was an uneasy meal with Clem bullilyingly ignoring Dot and talking to Flo.

"You're going out with me tanight, aren't you, love?" he asked. "We'll leave Dot to tickle herself."

"I'm not going," Flo answered low but distinctly.

"I should think not, with that . . . stallion," said Dot to wither him.

Bert chuckled, and then thrust into his mouth half of a potato out of the Irish stew.

Clem failed to think of a good retort quickly, and Flo got

up to side the plates. The pudding was sago and turned out to be not quite done. "Like cracking bloody nuts," said Clem.

"If you think you can cook better, you'd best come an' do it," said Dot. "All morning I've never seen you working."

"It's a damn safe bet as you've not done so much."

"I've not been propping door-posts."

"Wearing your backside out more likely. Anyway, it can stand it. I think I'll take Flo out for the afternoon instead. Any objections?"

"Yes," Bert put in unexpectedly. "We've got to spread that muck in Lake Pasture. Let's start."

He got up and put his billycock on. Clem stayed with arms sprawled beside his empty plate, then changed his intention and followed Bert, giving Dot unexpectedly a sharp squeeze with both hands from behind as he passed.

"Ough!" she gasped. "You great daft brute."

All afternoon till four she kept Flo at work, another job always ready, as if she spent her time planning them. Flo was grateful when Bert came in for her to help with evening milking.

"Can't you manage?" asked Dot. "We've enough to do."

"Can we heck manage," said Bert. "Clem'll be off any time to meet the train. If you're comin' yourself, well an' good; but I'm non doin' th' bloomin' lot myself."

So Dot let Flo go. Clem milked one cow and then said he was off. Bert kept the milk in his bucket frothing and did not reply. They heard the float wheels tapping over. Flo did her best, to see how many she could milk "at one meal," as she had heard the men say. Sitting down was a change from crawling and bending and rubbing, and somehow she was just in the right mood. The cows seemed to recognize this and let down their milk easily, so that for the first time she really began to get a froth and felt proud.

"You seem to like this job," said Bert, the first genuinely natural remark which had been passed to her all day.

"Yes; I don't know why, but I do," she said, glad to talk.

"It's non much in my line," he said, hidden by the next cow and going on milking.

"No; I know what you'd sooner do . . . shoot."

"Or fish."

"I like the lake," said Flo, feeling that the remark was a bit artificial.

"I don't see you much round there. You've never seen the ducks. They're worth seein'." Best year I've had. Some places you've to go careful or you'll tread on 'em."

"Will there be little ones soon?"

"There's plenty out. You'll see 'em, all right."

"How many will there be?" she asked, the milk from the red skewed cow she was under slackening off, causing her to begin stripping.

"Depends how many the bloody weasels an' stoats tek, how many the hawks an' them damn pyenots pinch, an' how many the pike pull down."

"Pyenots? What's that?"

"Pyenots . . . don't you know what a pyenot it? It's a . . . a pyenot, a maggie."

"Oh," said Flo, no wiser.

"You can come along after you've done, if you like," he offered as she stood in the gangway a moment before taking her milk out.

"I would like," she said gratefully.

After that she worked hard, trying to remember everything: feeding the calves, the pigs and the hens, helping to drive the cows into the Lake Pasture.

"They winna eat where we've spread their own muck, but there's plenty of feed round about, I reckon," said Bert. "It's a damn good field."

"Aren't all fields the same?" Flo asked.

Bert chuckled. "Ask the old man," he advised. "He'll tell you as best cawves as there is come off Lake Field." He imitated: "There's non another fielt i' Derbyshire noowheer ta touch it fer that job."

"What makes it?" asked Flo, really interested.

"Happen Pa'll tell you; I canna. It's herby, or something. Here they are."

Mrs. Nadin's lily was still nodding. She sat very upright in the chair with her umbrella tightly gripped in the middle by her right hand and lying across her knee. Her handbag, gripped equally tightly by her other hand, lay on top. But Mr. Nadin was not there.

"Hello, where's Pa?" Bert asked.

"The long lump o' tripe . . . I'll tripe 'im 'an stripe 'im when I get 'im," said Mrs. Nadin, lifting the umbrella as though to clout him if only he had been there. "I can goo ta hell for all he cares; but I bet I'll meet 'im there. Then I'll tansel 'im."

She got out as energetically as she had got in in the morning, and demanded to know what they had been "muckin' their time away wi'. Same as always, nowt done as should be done, an' everythin' done as shouldna."

"Haven't you brought Pa?" asked Dot, arriving from the back door.

"Aa'll Pa 'im," said Mrs. Nadin direfully. "Drownin' what bit o' sheep's brains 'e's got, the damned old tarnack. Slipped round the corner an' off wi' 'im. Wait till 'e comes!"

Chapter 13

FLO regarded Mr. Nadin's disappearance seriously, but none of the others seemed to. Mrs. Nadin kept remembering how he had gone, and for a moment or two called him all the names she could; but then she would veer off, describing things seen and persons met. She seemed to have enjoyed herself. Mr. Nadin, so Flo gathered, had disappeared almost as soon as the pair had got off the train.

"I were lookin' at a cape trimmed wi' dyed cat as they caws skunk-opossum, or summat, an' I says: 'Non so bad . . . for two-an'-six, eh?' An' 'e says, 'Ay.' Next time I looked 'e'd mizzled 'isself. I'll mizzle 'im!"

"He'll non miss th' last train; I reckon I'd better meet 'im," said Clem.

"If you do I'll hamstring you; let the old fool walk. If 'e gets run in, bread an' water'll clean 'is gizzard!"

The talk went on then as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Flo wondered if there was another family as queer anywhere. How had they ever come to marry? She couldn't imagine the tall quiet farmer courting Mrs. Nadin. More likely it was she who had bullied him into it. Flo felt sorry and wondered where he was.

"Coming with me?" asked a voice, and she started because of its closeness, and found Bert standing behind her chair. "I'm just going round . . . if you want a change."

She got up hurriedly. None of the others seemed to think anything about it. Bert left the door open and she went after him. She was surprised at the whiteness of the side of the barn, and then realized that it was the moon shining full on it from over the house. The cracks between the stones showed as clean black lines more clearly picked out than in sunlight. Going down the path out of the tilted shadow from the roof was like walking through something palpable, say a dark canvas awning. Going on into the field they had the moon very nearly in front, and Flo gazed up and thought how it looked like a bubble filled with white light. Sometimes it was so hard to think of the moon as anything but a flat disc pasted, as it were, on a flat black ceiling; but now, surrounded by miles of faintly luminous air, it was so obviously round and buoyant that she wouldn't have been surprised to have seen it float along just as a bubble would to the slightest breath.

"Grand night," said Bert with a gentle sort of purring appreciation which she had never heard from him before.

He had a stick only and no gun, and walked slowly and did not seem to wish her to say anything. The whole valley showed familiarly, yet completely different; all the hills more remote and smaller, dwarfed under the tremendous height where the stars were. Even the moors and cliffs of Moss Edge were smoother, as if they were no longer peat and gritstone, but had been changed into some kind of blue-grey aluminium alloy. Bert took the shortest route towards the willows, reaching them exactly where a narrow path went through. He whispered her to tread carefully. He stopped just in cover, pushing against the branches to make room for her at his side. Some of the lissom twigs touched her hands and cheeks with coolness and gentleness. She could smell the water fresh and slightly weedy. In the water was the moon, now as calm and round as in the sky, the next moment elongating in a ripple, breaking in two, then recovering its perfect shape without effort. As the ripple moved towards them it brought on its crest a stolen gift of moonlight, but lost it just as it touched the beach. Other ripples followed, making some-

times a continuous convoy of moon bits, but they all went out at the edge of the land. Bert pointed, and she saw to the right about twenty yards out a flotilla of dark dots led by what was unmistakably a duck. She looked closer along the beach, and as far as she could see there were ducks dabbling or preening, or floating headless and motionless.

"Worth seein', eh?" said Bert, so low that she could scarcely tell.

He turned, pushing past, and led back into the field. They were in shadow again, the broken shadow of the willow rods, which made a queer mottling across their eyes as they walked on. Roughly at fifty-yard intervals there were other narrow paths. Bert knew all, though Flo would have passed most of them, because they started at an angle and curved and were not obvious like the first straight path. Bert led down each one, and every time that they stopped, just in hiding, Flo saw more ducks. At least she thought that they were all ducks till Bert whispered, "Water-hen and coot as well." And suddenly he jerked up his stick silently, and she saw crossing the moon three flying ducks. They circled and dropped with a simultaneous ploughing splash, surprisingly loud though they were a score of yards out. One of the ducks gave a challenging *Quark-quark!* which echoed as off a sounding board.

"Careful; don't scare 'em," warned Bert, leading the way back.

They reached the point of the field and turned along the inside of willows hedging what Flo guessed must be a long arm of the lake reaching back almost to the road. Here they were in full moonlight once more. It was so bright that Flo imagined that she could feel it warm like sunshine. Bert sauntered slower than before, but did not lead through the bushes. Flo was scared by a sudden whickering, but it was only a peewit which flew close above them with a pulsing, rushing sound and skirled noisily. Bert cursed and moved a little quicker. As the bird turned and tossed there was a glinting reflection off its neck or back. Just before they reached the lane where the bridge was Bert burrowed leftward and the bird flew higher, still crying, but less agitatedly, until it forgot them. The willows made a caging overhead. The

ground sloped quickly and was soft. Bert paused to warn her, then went ahead with five long strides, balancing with his stick. Flo made out dimly the black back of a partly drowned branch. It was roughly knuckled, and the knuckles were the stepping places. She felt with her foot. The branch seemed greasy and a nervousness spread up her legs.

"Come on," ordered Bert sharply, "there's no depth."

She reached for the first place quickly, knowing that if she hesitated she would never dare it. Her shoe slipped forward, leaving her balance backward, and her rear foot to save her went down quickly into four inches of water. But it touched solid, and she covered the rest of the crossing in four desperate splashing leaps. Without comment Bert turned and went on. Her feet were soaked and felt muddy, but she was relieved at being safe, and hoped that they would not have to go back by the same path. They reached higher, dryer footing and walked out of the willows into a larger field, also roughly triangular. Here the willows had a rearguard of sycamores and alders. Bert passed slowly in their shadow, the meadow looking white in the moonlight. At the far side were lines of little slant shadows low down which for a moment puzzled Flo. Then she realized that there were muck lumps awaiting spreading, and that by a moon trick the shadows showed more than the lumps. She had just solved this when she noticed movement beyond. She stopped to make sure, and Bert at once looked the same way and exclaimed, "The young devil!"

He touched her sleeve for her to keep motionless. From the far willows she saw a man or youth walk out. He paused temporarily, looking keenly about, his face showing up as a pale disc; then he turned quickly towards the point, but after fewer than a dozen paces went out of their sight again in the willows.

"Stay here," ordered Bert. "If it's Jack Knight, I'll cripple the bastard."

Swiftly whispering he told her to keep in shadow and watch. He would go back and across the bottom side and work up from behind. "If he breaks cover to run, shout."

Too excited to speak, Flo nodded. Bert went deeper into the shadow by the willows and disappeared. Flo concentrated on the far side, but the intruder kept hidden, too. She

listened till she fancied she heard her ear-drums creaking. The night was as silent and still as a photograph, and her excitement gave place to doubt. Suppose it were Jack Knight and he were to break out of the bushes behind her! She glanced back, then laughed uncertainly and stared rightward, hoping to see Bert. When she looked across again there was the intruder walking more slowly. Her lips opened. She stopped only just in time, for he was still going towards the point. She stared, trying to make out if it was Jack. He was two hundred yards off, and the light, which seemed so clear, held a baffling mistiness only apparent when one made an effort to pick out details. Nevertheless, she thought it was Jack's figure. She remembered that Bert had said that Jack would trade in anything. But this was thieving . . . she had not thought him a thief. No, that was wrong. Poacher, not thief. But was poaching, stealing? She recalled having read somewhere that wild birds and animals couldn't possibly belong to anybody while they were free to fly and run; not until they were dead. And then they ought to belong to the person who shot them. Perhaps that was what Jack thought. She remembered the blue of his eyes when he had spoken with her, and found that she couldn't think of him as a thief.

The intruder had gone again, but now far to the right she saw another figure, which she guessed was Bert, stooping and moving quickly. Her speculations stopped; she stared half-right, then half-left, wholly occupied with watching. Little tremblings shook her, and she touched the rough alder bole for steadiness. Bert went in among the rods and was lost again. The intruder came out and looked about. Because he was so obvious in the open she felt that she must be obvious, too, and therefore she cringed back behind the trunk. But after a moment he went out of sight once more. Eventually Bert reappeared much nearer, moving more slowly. He stared across as if trying to locate her; only he had been explicit that she was not to betray herself.

He crept on, pausing every now and then in the bent attitude of a listener. He went into the rods once more, and once more she was solitary in the still world. She did not see anything more of the intruder, and many moments passed. Perhaps they had grappled in the bushes and were fighting.

She wondered if she ought to rush across. She listened, taut as wire, but she could not hear anything. Then surprisingly Bert came out and waved and she crossed through the moonlight.

"Must have seen me, or heard me, the damn blighter," he exclaimed while she was still ten yards off.

"Got away?" asked Flo incredulously, yet with a sensation of relief.

"Ay; but he got a soaking," said Bert with some satisfaction.

"Was it Jack Knight?" she asked, unable to stop herself.

Bert turned into the willows, pushing through and letting them whip back so that she had to hold her hands to her face and got three stinging slashes on her wrists. She missed his reply. He went on down the little slope of beach, and she saw a slurred black track in the mud just by the water.

"Gone straight across. Swum in the middle; couldn't ha' got without," commented Bert, staring. They were on another long arm of the water that went in rightward to a point completely shut in by willows. "Cheekiest little bugger of a poacher in the valley. If I lay hands on him I'll wring his bloody neck."

Flo didn't like to ask again if it were Jack. She thought it couldn't be; but she was not sure.

"Come on, I shouldn't wonder he's lookin' at us. The tale'll go all over," said Bert disgusted, starting round.

He led back into the bushes with long strides. Flo felt that in part he really blamed her, though she couldn't think that the intruder had seen her. In the field again Bert turned right and they went on to the point where Flo was surprised to see the outline of a hut about twenty feet long set well in among the bushes, as if in hiding. Coarse tussocks grew to the step. It was as plain as could be with a door in the middle and one window at either side. Bert looked in first through one window, then through the other, and seemed satisfied.

"Let it out to parties in summer," Bert answered her unspoken question. "Sometimes Dick Goldbourn stays."

"However does he get?" she asked, remembering her wetting and instantly feeling her feet starved again.

"Oh, there's a way off the main road," Bert explained. "But it's surprisin' what he can do."

They turned back down the side up which Bert had stalked. An owl went over, about fifteen feet up, unseen by Flo till unexpectedly its broad body and wide wings momentarily cut out the moon. "Oo, I wondered whatever it was," she exclaimed, wondering why she hadn't heard its flight as she had heard the peewit's. Bert did not answer, going on with long paces which made her hurry. His mood had completely changed; as if now she was a nuisance and he regretted having brought her. When she judged that they had reached the end of the arm of the water he swung leftward, and she saw a travelling light and heard a rumble and knew that they were nearing the main road. They came to a wall which he vaulted, leaving her to get over as best she could. Then they were going leftward faster than ever, and soon he got back over the wall and they were behind more willows with the moonlight towards them broken between the rods.

"You never know; he's such a blighter he may be helpin' himself this side," said Bert.

"Wet through!" exclaimed Flo. "He'd catch his death." She shivered from her feet upward.

"Not if there was chance of eggs . . ." said Bert. "He's tough; he wouldn't burn in hell. But I'll not wait next time; I'll put some shot in 'his buttocks. Happen he'll be glad to cool hisself in the water then. Cuss 'im!"

But whoever the intruder was, he had gone. They went back by the road. Clem was alone in the kitchen and the clock showed ten to twelve.

"This is a gay time," said Clem with mock disapproval, appraising her downward to muddied boots and ankles. "What about lettin' me take you next night?"

She bent to untie her laces and did not speak.

Chapter 14

THE strangeness of Flo's new life was wearing off. Living all together in the big kitchen it was impossible for any dividing line to last long. Indeed, Flo had already realized that Mrs. Nadin treated everybody alike, and that her tongue

was always fiercer than herself. It said harsh things just for the joy of saying them; it announced threats when there was no intention that the threats should be carried out. Thus when Flo went down she knew by the vacant nail at the mantelpiece end and the absence of the stiff crusted boots from the hearth by the hot-water tank that the farmer must be back and out at his usual first morning jobs. Mrs. Nadin did not speak. She bustled about seeing to the porridge as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. When the farmer came in he seemed unchanged.

"Sit thee down an' get that in thi belly," said Mrs. Nadin, planting a plate before him.

He scooped it up without comment."

Flo wondered what time he had got back, and was puzzled that she had not heard any row. She had expected the whole household to be wakened. She went out about her own usual jobs, and then found the one difference that his escapade had left on the farmer: he was quieter than ever. During the whole of the milking he never spoke. He was shut in within himself. Bert and Clem talked occasionally to each other and to her, but they did not address their father, and Flo felt constrained and afraid of him; his silence was a kind of evil temper, much worse than Mrs. Nadin's aggressive but open attack, and Flo wondered whether that explained why nothing had been heard in the night. Perhaps when he was in this mood even Mrs. Nadin was afraid. How strange to be married to a man like that. She hoped that she didn't get anyone with moods; anyway she'd do her best to see that she didn't. Did Mrs. Nadin know when she got married; or had she only learned since?

While these thoughts were passing Flo went on milking steadily. She was getting used to this job, too; her wrists were getting used to it, so that she could work mechanically. The rhythmical churring sound seemed to encourage easy drifting thought. Resting on the stool, her shoulders and head slightly supported against the cow's warm side, she could relax in real comfort. On one of her early days, when Bert had told her how he sometimes fell asleep and had been awakened more than once by the bucket slipping, pouring milk into his boots, Flo hadn't believed him. Now after her

late night she knew that to fall asleep would be easy. She looked up at the wall-lamp, which threw its best light in a slightly tremulous circle on the whitewashed baulks immediately over the glass. Lower on the wall the light looked dirty, a yellow stain; this because of the contrast of the true white light coming in through the doorplace. And with the dawn light in came bird songs with a distant clean sweetness. But she was aware of this only as a pleasant background as her thoughts reviewed easily without special purpose the men she had met or seen who might, well . . . who might be possible husbands. There was the boy she had seen on the submarine; where was he? There was Jack Oates, probably off again round the world. Others there were whom she had seen and liked and remembered, though she had never known their names. And so . . . then she noticed that the cow was nearly done and stripping occupied her, for she was determined never to have it put against her that she had spoiled any cattle through not doing that job well.

She went into the four-shippon and began on Polly, the black "hornie". Now her thoughts went back to the evening, and she wondered again if the man after the eggs were Jack Knight or not; and whether he got home all right. Suppose she married a poacher without knowing that he was a poacher till he came home one night dripping and slimy. Hurriedly she switched off Jack Knight and considered Dick Goldbourn. He at least couldn't turn out poacher; he had no need to poach. Although she had never thought of them before, she remembered now his clothes: loose-woven greeny tweed, thick and expensive. How nice it would be to marry a man who could dress in good things, and, of course, who would buy whatever you wanted! She thought of her costume hanging behind the curtain under the triangular bedroom shelf, and of how long she had to work yet to pay for it. How exciting and fine when there was someone to buy anything; not just clothes alone, but a home and . . . and everything!

If only Dick had not been crippled, she decided, he would have been just right. He was quiet. He was of the kind she felt that she could trust; not a chancy sort like Clem.

Clem happened to be mooching up the shippon. He dropped his left eyelid and arched his right eyebrow. If there

were no other men in the world than Clems she would never marry, she thought. But his passing reminded her of his advice, about asking for time off. It was Thursday, just a fortnight since she had gone round the lake and rescued Dick Goldbourn. Why shouldn't she ask? It wasn't right that she should work Saturdays, Sundays and all days. When she went with milk to the churn again she was determined that she would ask; but she would be careful—she would wait until Mrs. Nadin seemed to be in a good mood. Despite her apparent usualness at porridge time, Flo suspected that Mrs. Nadin was still bitter about her husband's desertion. So Flo watched and waited all morning. But, whatever Mrs. Nadin's mood, there was scarcely an opportunity when Flo could have asked her. Flo was told to clean all the windows, and a long, difficult and quite dangerous job it was. The windows were of the sash type, but never till she came to clean them had Flo realized how big they were. Seated out on the sill with the upper half of a window down on her thighs it was all that she could do to clean the top corners. When she got to the attic at first she was too afraid to get on the sill, and tried to reach from the bottom and then over the top without sitting out. Only it was no good. The parts that she cleaned showed up the parts that she had not cleaned, and she was ashamed. She looked round her room for something with which she could tie herself to the bed, but there was nothing; a sheet would not have been long enough. So that all that she could do was put the lucky heart-stone and the green pig in her apron pocket and pray to be kept safe. She put her head out hesitantly, gripping hard on the bottom frame. And then, except for the awful thought of how far off the ground was, it was no different from doing the lower windows. She had been foolish to let the height scare her, and when the panes shone iridescently, as well done as she could do them, she dared to look about. The two views were quite different from those she normally got through the window. Rightward she looked over the lake, but across the eastern end. She was surprised to be able to see right over the willows the pear-shaped lagoon in full. There on the very tip of the point where she had walked she saw Dick Goldbourn in his wheeled chair. Out of bravado she waved, not expecting any

return. Nevertheless, she was disappointed that none came. She faced petulantly the other way and saw over the ridge end of the barn the top of Adam's Pike, like an immense grey-green pyramid. As she stared a swallow shot up from behind the barn in a smooth swift glide and came flickering towards her at express rate. It came so close that she saw its chestnut throat and purple-blue, and as it fled its confidential twitter, heard for a moment only, seemed to be meant to tell her that summer was coming and that life was good and all would be well. It was the first swallow of the year. She turned her head swiftly to watch, and the bird swooped on towards the lagoon and the distant fisherman, and then became invisible against the meshed background of the willows.

She got back into the room carefully, glad that she had risked it, but glad to be safe again. She looked at the stone and lucky pig on her palm.

"Find me a nice husband," she whispered impulsively, and at once laughed and put them back on the dressing-table, the pig on the left just under the glass from where he regarded her quizzically, all of him tilted to one side because of his missing leg. As Flo went downstairs her thoughts flew back to the fisherman on the point; she wondered whether he had caught anything.

Dinner passed and she was never once alone with Mrs. Nadin. Then Dot went upstairs and Flo was told to swill the flags.

"Scrub 'em. I canna abide green moss; it's the mark of a slut. Use plenty of water, an' a good hard brush," said Mrs. Nadin briskly. "Good clean stone's worth lookin' at."

"And when that's done, may I go out?" asked Flo, quaking.

"Heck, an' what for?" demanded Mrs. Nadin. "You're not runnin' the boys already?"

"No," said Flo, reddening. "But it was Thursday last time and I thought . . ."

"There's no lad in pants worth runnin' after," the little woman broke in tartly. "I thought I'd some sense when I chose my man, an' look at 'im! A dummy in a raffle 'ud be more obedient, an' happen a damn seet prettier. 'Stead o' marryin' a man, get a pup; you con turn that loose when

you've a mind." She reached up into the big cupboard and seemed to have forgotten how the talk had begun.

"But may I go?" asked Flo desperately.

"Go? Ay, go to the devil, an' marry 'im . . . happen he's no worse than t'others."

"I mean go out."

"Ay," said Mrs. Nadin keeping at her work. "I reckon you'll be like a bitch in heat till you've gotten what they aw get. But dunna forget them flags."

Flo finished washing-up and hurried out in Dot's clogs which she had worn before for swilling. She liked the clatter of them, and would have tried a dance only for Mrs. Nadin listening. Splashing the buckets into the trough one after the other she let them gurgle full, then carried them brimming to the door. Half of a bucket she tossed down at one splash, and seizing the brush she began to scrub as if she would wear the flags through.

"Dunna waste water; use elbow weight," ordered Mrs. Nadin, standing on the step. "Th' edges is as important as middles."

But apparently Flo's energy satisfied her, for she went off up the passage. After that Flo spilled water more sparingly because it saved carrying, and a big flood only ran away before she could properly use it. She scrubbed till she felt that she could scrub no more. The path at the back was easy because footwear kept moss off. She soon had that clean to the buff and knew that it would dry cream; but round the house the real surface was hard to get to. Only now that she had permission to go out she was in no particular hurry, because she did not know where she should go. So she kept at the flags till they shone and there was no speck anywhere. She felt that she had really earned time off. She even looked from the bedroom window to admire the flags as the birds would see them.

She dressed in her best, in her costume, and Dot was in the kitchen and saw her.

"Where are you off?" she demanded crossly.

"To Moss," retorted Flo on an impulse. "It's my day out."

Dot sniffed. Flo gave her turban an extra little tug behind

her right ear and walked out straight-backed. But she was glad that Mrs. Nadin wasn't there. Because of her retort to Dot she had to turn leftward at the lane, though she was doubtful whether she really wanted to go to Moss. If she went to the lake perhaps Dick might still be there. But dare she . . . ?

She went on more resolutely, past where she had stopped with Colonel by the hedge and talked with Jack Knight; and down the dip towards the bridge over the sluggish willow shallow that she had had to cross with Bert. From the bridge the lane began its curving climb to the main road, the slant at first gradual, though quickly increasing. Walking by the left-hand hedge and rounding the first curve she saw thirty yards ahead on the same side with one of its wheels against the grass bank Dick Goldbourn's chair, and he in it looking along the slope of the fields towards Moss. Her impulse was to stop and slip quietly back; then she asked herself, "Why?" She went on and after a moment a recognizing smile chased his thoughtfulness and he greeted her with a cheerful:

"Pass, friend, all's well."

"What do you mean?" asked Flo.

"Pass; I can't trouble you a second time." He looked up and the smile in his eyes seemed to take on more depth. "I can't quite manage up the brow; I usually wait till somebody comes."

"Well, I've come," said Flo practically. "I can push as well as anyone."

"I know you can." He smiled again, still hesitating, then grasped the handwheels and slewed the chair square with the hill. Flo pushed. He was heavy, but it was easier than at the lake-side because her feet had grip. He worked his hands alternatively, always having hold of one wheel or the other so that the weight should never be entirely left to her. At the steepest part they were shut in by the tall banks and the hollies, and Flo wondered what would happen if a car came round the bend suddenly too far over. But the road was left to them and they came out on the level panting a little.

"Thanks again; I'm sorry to have had to trouble you," he said rather formally.

"I was glad to help."

"You'll be waiting for a bus?"

"No; I don't know how they run. It's my day off. I thought I'd go to the market," said Flo, walking beside him.

"Then if you don't mind, and I don't go too slow or too fast, two's company and one's none."

She did not answer. Looking away she saw a flock of pigeons flash white as they turned in the sunlight against the grey-green of Adam's Pike half a mile north. A yellow six-wheeled lorry rushed by down the main road taking limestone to the Cheshire plain. They crossed and got on the footpath on the far side.

"Been to the market before?" asked Dick, suiting his pace to her's. "It isn't much, you know."

They talked about markets for a quarter of a mile while Flo let her eyes wander over the hedges to the hill slopes on either side of the broad valley, all the time walking as primly as she could. After that there was a silent hundred yards till she was surprised to hear him ask if it was she who had been at the window. "The top one. I reckon it's pretty dangerous."

"Not if you hold on," said Flo, wondering if he had seen her wave.

"But how can you hold properly when you have the leather to shift from one hand to the other . . . and to do other things?"

"Oh, I hold on all right."

"I don't know whether you do," he answered gravely. "I saw you signalling to someone. If you were to fall and damage your back there'd be two lame ducks waddling about in push-chairs. You don't know how lucky you are: you should take care."

She thought he sounded like a father. But she was relieved because apparently he hadn't guessed who her signal had been for.

"I do know," she protested, looking down on his unnaturally straight legs, experiencing a gush of sympathy. "It must be horrible; I don't know how you put up with it and keep so . . . well, you don't really seem to mind."

"What's the use?" he asked, smiling slightly, but not in his eyes which she saw acorn brown and still. "I'm lucky, too, in some ways. I'm not forced to work, and I can get

about. There's the lake and . . . well, lots of things."

"Nothing's so bad as it can't be worse, I suppose," murmured Flo, feeling that it was false; the kind of thing that Mrs. Howell would have said.

"No," Dick agreed unconvincingly. "The worst is being dependent on other people. Things I can't do."

"You mean me again," Flo accused. "But I *like* to help."

"I'm sure; but everybody isn't like you."

An elderly woman poking with a stick stood back against the hedge while he manœuvred past, and Flo had to step into the roadway. They had come to the first houses of Moss. They were villas, half red brick, half grey pebble-dash, and faced one another aloofly across the road, their backs austere turned on the beautiful views of the valley which even passers-by had a job to see over their shoulders. The intimacy which had been growing between Flo and her companion fell away and she felt that it was time to leave him. Probably he wouldn't want to be seen with her there, though she could not detect any change in his manner. It was simply their talk that had been stifled by the villas. Then they were between long continuous rows of gritstone, the old cottages that stood unashamed on their own doorsteps up to the road without the least attempt at a garden. Flo liked them at once; they were so much more homely than the villas. As she went past she caught the yellow flickerings in the grates of little kitchens, suggesting welcome. Dick called, "How do?" across the street to a man in a floury cap and jacket and bran-bag apron who was unloading from a horse lorry. "Non so bad. How's yourself, sirrie?" the man called back, pausing with a sack balanced on his shoulders. The close cottages kept the talk in, almost as if they were in a room.

The road became a street, too narrow for more than one pavement, and this too narrow for the chair. Dick had to go in the roadway and Flo watched alertly for any cars coming. Then, where two pubs faced—The Royal Standard tall and haughty, its sign in a glass case hanging from iron scrollwork, The Bull low and ancient with a stone-cut head minus horns jutting over the door like a sailing ship figurehead—the street opened abruptly on the left into a square. Where Flo and Dick had come to, street and square were level; fifty yards

farther on where the square ended and houses began on the left again the street was ten feet lower than the square, and went on descending steeply. The built-up side of the square was walled. Along the top were railings and a row of youngish lime trees. Over the railings leaned five men and a woman, as over a balcony, watching traffic plod uphill or coast easily down. Behind the watchers Flo saw the top of a dark stone cross; "thousands of years old" she thought at once. Two-thirds of the way up the centre piece of the cross a rope was knotted, its other end going to the tilted-up shaft of a flat cart. Over the rope hung a rectangle of dirty grey canvas giving crude shelter to a vegetable stall. To the other shaft was tied a black pony with collar and tracings on, its nose tucked into a sack on an empty orange crate.

"It's not much, but what there is, it's there," said Dick, stopping at the corner below the steps of The Royal Standard.

There were seven other stalls with proper wood frames and canvas awnings, and pots were displayed in a coloured circle twelve feet across without sky protection of any kind.

"My, but it's diff'rent from our market," exclaimed Flo, pleased by the number of persons about, more than she had seen together since passing through Manchester.

At the far corner over the stalls, looking down another narrow street of grey houses she saw the square tower of the church; and beyond again were the hills watching as they watched over everything.

"Well, so long," said Dick, and he gave a kind of salute and started off down the street. All five men leaning over the railings nodded to him, and Flo felt that they had been staring curiously. She started across to the pots. All the crockery seemed to be piled up, but she found that this was merely an appearance caused by the things in the centre having been placed on boxes of different heights. At one side there was a big wicker clothes basket full of odd cups. Two women kept dipping, examining cups and putting them back. Another younger woman, "just getting married" Flo thought, had an eighteen inches high "Cherry Boy" which she held at arm's length, tilting her head leftwards while she seriously considered it. There was no one trying to sell any of these things. It looked as though anyone could have walked off

with anything. Apparently the stall-holders didn't come to Moss to try to sell much, but more as a holiday. After five minutes spent by Flo idly looking over three tea-services, the woman with the "Cherry Boy" began to stare round in a business-like way.

"Five an' six, I think," said a man in a slouched cap, grey shirt-sleeves, and a long apron striped light and dark blue. He was leaning against a motor van with an open back in which could be seen several not very tempting cuts of beef. "Sal's over yonder," nodding towards a cheese stall where two women in black aprons and gum-boots were talking. Flo watched the statuette being rolled unceremoniously in yellow paper. The stall-holder handed it over rather as though it were a pound of tripe, but the young woman at once uprighted it and carried it carefully against her breast. Flo felt envious. She turned away towards a stall that was more busy than any of the others. From the cross-pieces under the awning swung attractive blouses and summer dresses on hangers, and over the rails were neatly folded nightdresses, pyjamas, vests, petticoats and knickers. But the thirteen women clustered round were not interested in these. They were all reaching and picking things up like children dipping in a bran-tub. Flo saw that the stall was really a shallow oblong box, the sides nine inches high. In it was a great tangle of material, of many kinds, many patterns, many colours. Anyone who caught sight of an end or corner that looked interesting, got hold and gave a pull. Flo couldn't resist. After a few seconds she managed to get to the front. At first she was shy and simply watched. It was funny. Nobody appeared to want what was on top; they all seemed sure that the best bits were underneath, so that the tangle was never left still. Everything in it was nearly continuously on the move, "like a bloody lot of squirming guts" as the butcher by the open van had often thought. At last Flo reached for a piece of sky-blue crepe-de-chine, simply to feel its silkiness, and just as her fingers were about to close it started to ebb away, to disappear beneath a heavy end of red-and-brown tweed. Flo snatched back her hand, as if it had been about to do something wrong. Then a glance across showed her a tall thin woman in gold pince-nez and a feathered

straw hat vigorously tugging sky-blue by the yard. Flo couldn't imagine what she could want crepe-de-chine for. She was tempted to grab and try to tug the material back. But she reached for a piece of deep red velvet instead because it looked so rich. There was only half a yard, but it was thick and even more luxurious to touch than to look at. While she was still enjoying it she was surprised to see the stall-holder straightening the blue crepe-de-chine along her round, scratched yard-stick. Fifteen yards, and after a little arguing the woman with the pince-nez tightened her lips and began to fiddle in her black leather handbag which had a gold clip. Flo forgot the velvet and stared after her. The antique feathered hat showed up above all other hats. It went round the outside of the cluster and Flo turned to see where the woman was going with the precious parcel. In the centre of the market stood a black-and-yellow Rolls Royce, but of antique type, with a grey-haired chauffeur in fir-green livery. The woman gave him the parcel and went on towards the pot heap.

"Bargain hunter," said a familiar voice close behind Flo. Turning quickly, she found Jack Knight there. He grinned. "Enjoyin' yourself?"

She took a step back and her place was at once taken by a woman in navy blue serge who pushed unceremoniously against her shoulder.

"Have you paid up?" asked Jack.

Flo was shocked to find the velvet still in her hand. She turned confusedly to put it back, but found the way blocked.

"Dunna bother," said Jack, grasping the velvet in a far-from-clean hand. Flo let go, and he tossed it in a ball over the head of the woman in serge.

"I don't know whatever I was doing!" exclaimed Flo. "She'll think I was trying to steal."

"I've seen it done before; but the right way is to have a handbag to stuff it in. They're a rum lot that get round this stall. I come specially to watch 'em sometimes." He chuckled. Flo thought that he might be kidding, but though his lips curved humorously, his light blue eyes were serious. "I get more entertainment out of watching folk like that than I do at the pictures," he said in his curious flat assertive

way; rather suggesting that he expected her to doubt it, but didn't care if she did.

Flo did not know what to say.

"It's like honey to bees; they can't keep away," he went on.

Flo felt that she ought to stick up for herself. "I don't know," she said. "If you don't look, you don't know what bargains you might miss; there might be something ever so cheap."

"I bet there is; I bet what old Miss Bamber got," slightly tilting his head towards the Rolls Royce, "was cheap. She can afford it, anyway. But there's lots as sees stuff as is cheap, an' buy it 'cause of that, an' don't really want it. However cheap it is, if they dunna need it, it's dear."

"It might come in sometime."

"Yes, but some of them can't afford it even for that. They're just tempted and can't help it . . . on'y they never think."

Flo had not expected him to talk like this. She remembered what Mr. Nadin had told her. "Anyway, you're always buying, so they say. Do you always know what you're going to do with things?"

"That's my job," he retorted. "If I canna sell a thing again, or make something out of it, it's my own fault."

"And isn't it just their own fault if they buy something that they don't need?"

He smiled. "That isn't an argument. It's my job to buy; it isn't their's. They buy 'cause they can't help it . . . like a youngster taking a toffee off a counter. He doesn't mean to steal. He just sees it and wants it. When they go to the stall they don't mean to buy. But they just see something, and that's that."

"You seem to think you know," said Flo unconvinced.

"I've watched 'em," he said, a teasing gleam in his eyes. "You can sell a woman anything if you go about it right."

"You seem to think you know," Flo repeated. "I don't think you could sell me anything I didn't want."

"No; but before I tried to sell, I'd get you to want it. That's the trick."

"Oh," said Flo. "I should call that deceit."

"Pretty nearly all business is," he said, his high cheek-boned

features set. "Only folk don't think of it that way." He turned away and asked if she had seen the cheese stall. "It makes my mouth water. There's nothin' better than cheese. I sometimes feel I could buy a whole one . . . whether I need it or not," he added with a sly smile.

Under the awning were five cheeses in a row, the left-hand marker a marigold yellow, the rest creamy or nearly white. Behind them was a tall, pink-cheeked man in a pure-white long linen slop. "Hello," said Jack, "owt any good, Amos?"

Amos unfolded his arms. "Aa didna see yo' last week?" he said in a slow satisfying drawl. "What yo' bin buyin' lately? Bedsteads or barrels or buckets; or is it poultry this week?"

"Nay, I've had a thin week," Jack replied. "Been gettin' on with a bit o' work. If I don't get the stuff in, it'll be too late."

"Got your greenhouse up yet?"

"I've started; be able to let you have some tomatoes this back-end."

"My favourite fruit. Try that; a bit of the best." To Jack he held over on the two-inch blade of his knife a cube of the creamiest cheese.

"Go on, take it," Jack told Flo. Amos nodded. There was scarcely any need to bite; the cheese melted. But it was rather strong.

"Try that, then. Ladies usually prefer that."

This time it was a sliver, not as crumbly or creamy, but very much milder.

"No, the other's the cheese," said Jack. "Put me up a couple of that."

"Grand stuff for toasting," Amos commented, cutting the triangular section with his pink slim palm flat against it to stop breakage. "Two pounds and an ounce for luck. When are you gettin' wed, Jack?"

"When I find a woman as is worth it," answered Jack soberly. "Most of them think too much about lip-paint and flour-powder for my liking. There's nothing prettier than things that are natural; flowers don't titivate up and all that. That's the sort I want."

The stall-man winked at Flo. "Save you a lot of cookin' and house-work, you know."

"I can do that," said Jack. "There's a thing or two I could show one or two of them. Thanks. How much? Right. I'll be seein' you."

"Do you live alone?" asked Flo as they walked between the stalls.

"Not quite," he answered enigmatically. "But I mostly look after myself."

"Do . . . do you get lonely?"

"You're on'y lonely when you think you are. It's nothing to do with other folk; it's yourself."

"Oh, I don't know," she protested, trying to think it out.

"Everything's yourself. You can be lonely in a crowd . . . if you want. I know I've never felt less lonely than on Moss Edge yonder, or up Adam's Pike."

"There's not many like that," Flo said slowly.

"If we all thought of things as we ought, perhaps things 'ud be different. On'y most of us just go on and let things happen an' don't think. Look at them kids."

His voice became alert, and Flo saw three boys of not more than four jumping out of the back of the dilapidated float which she recognized. On the cobbles they collapsed and rolled about with laughter, but after a second or so they were up again and scrambling into the float for another jump.

"Hi!" called Jack without anger. "What d'you think you're doing? If the horse sets off yo'd break your necks."

The youngsters abruptly went quiet and stared with wide sober eyes.

"Why aren't you at school?" he asked.

"Dunna go," said one with full cheeks and a black smear like an immense Victorian moustache under his pink snub nose.

"You're young Tim Backhouse, aren't you?" The urchin nodded. "Ay, I thought you were. And you're Sal Morgan's lad; and you're Peter Binks." Neither of them gave the slightest sign. "Wait till I see your mothers."

"You won't, will you?" said Flo on their behalf.

Jack winked and set his left foot in the float and pulled himself up. The whole of the front of the float was filled

with dirty-looking plant pots of many different sizes. "Can't invite you for a ride very well. They're for the greenhouse . . . when it's ready," he said, smiling. "Oh well . . ." He sat back comfortably against the float side dangling the reins negligently, and made a clicking in his throat. The piebald, after appearing to consider, started slowly. "I'll be seein' you."

"Yes," said Flo, with the three children regarding her solemnly. She wondered why she had come with him to the float. And all at once she remembered and started after him. The float was trundling towards the church, the horse stepping considerably on the rough old setts.

"A minute," called Flo, hoping that there was nobody listening or watching. The horse stopped. "I meant to tell you." She was panting a little. "I thought I'd better, in . . . in case it was you."

He looked down, half-puzzled, half-amused.

She began again: "I hope you won't mind." He dropped to the ground and it was easier for her. "But if it was you last night, Bert says next time he'll shoot an' not wait."

"Eh," exclaimed Jack. "Shoot! What for?"

He sounded so sincere that Flo lost doubt at once. "It wasn't you, then. But it did look like you."

Jack grinned and asked how she meant.

"I . . . I don't know, but it did, somehow," said Flo, a little confused by his direct stare. "It was across a field and dark; well, it was in moonlight."

"What time?"

"It must have been half-past nine," she answered consideringly.

"I was walking from the library to Border Bridge. I bet it was young Buck Willox. He's a beggar. Went across, ha, ha, Bert would be mad! I'll chip him next time."

"I don't know," said Flo quickly. "I don't know whether I should have told. But I didn't want . . ."

"Don't worry," he broke in, patting her hand in a quick, curious way. "He'll not know it was you. Thanks for telling me. D'you often go round with him?"

"No, it's the first time."

"He's a good chap; better than Clem. But he can't stick

anyone after his ducks. I bet he would shoot. I'll keep away. Thanks for warnin' me. I'll pull his leg." He laughed. "Oh well . . . ta, ta!"

Again he gave his curious stiff flip to his forehead. Flo walked away without looking back. She was rather sorry that she had said anything. Why had he asked how often she went round with Bert?

Chapter 15

ABOUT ten on Thursday morning Flo was dusting the stairs when a knock sounded on the open back door. Mrs. Nadin was getting dinner in the kitchen. She shouted at once, "Come in. Canna you see door's oppen?"

Nailed boots entered, but only a few steps, hesitantly. Flo, peeping between the bannister rails, saw in the passage a lanky youth about fourteen with a thick auburn mop and a black patch on the seat of grey whipcord breeches.

"Who are you?" demanded Mrs. Nadin, unseen.

"I'm Mr. Willox's son. I've come . . ."

"Eh!" exclaimed Mrs. Nadin, appearing so suddenly that the lad took a quick pace back. "You're the young b——r that comes stealing our eggs."

"Me? No," stuttered the lad, getting a bit farther back all the time with sideways, twisting movements. "Me? Why . . .?"

"Shut your trap, you young liar," snapped Mrs. Nadin. "I'll Willox's son you. Where's Bert? He's going to put some shot into you where you won't want it. Come here, you little devil, let me get . . ." She strode out, but he turned and ran. Instead of making for the lane he went towards the field gate, vaulted it and disappeared behind the buildings. "Where are you?" screeched Mrs. Nadin, but no one answered. A minute passed before Mr. Nadin stepped out of the barn-door wicket and asked mildly what was up. "You, you wooden yead," his wife screeched. He blinked and so obviously hadn't the least idea of what it was all about that Flo nearly laughed out, and had to tip-toe hurriedly from the landing window to which she had run. Whatever the lad had come for she could not imagine, but she did not

think that he looked the sort to be scared even by the threat of a charge of buck shot. She wondered whether she would have been able to stop him when they were after him had he bolted over the field instead of escaping across the water.

After that life went on uneventfully, while the grass in all three meadows lengthened and thickened slowly. Mr. Nadin, helped spasmodically by Bert and Clem, set half an acre of King Edwards, and in a special corner at the point of Lake Field put in beans and peas, cauliflowers and cabbages, carrots and sprouts, beetroots and lettuces enough for the household and their visitors. Here in the extending evenings he dug and hoed; he was very seldom in the house except for meals and sleep. Sometimes Flo, after finishing up from tea, would go to the point and hoe or weed. There, as he never did indoors, Mr. Nadin would talk, mainly about the things that they were doing.

"Lots o' chaps says as you should shove broad beans in as early as you can 'cos it'll keep fly off. I dunna believe it. I know a chap as puts 'em in in November, an' what happens? Mice eats 'em, or it's a wet time an' they go rotten."

"What's fly?" asked Flo innocently.

"You'll see, then you'll know."

She liked these quiet conversations; she must have been born with an interest in growing things which she had not found out before. But also she liked being in the little triangular garden plot because of where it was, between the willows. Sometimes the water beyond was so still it was only a silver background for the bushes; but sometimes it talked with the breeze, and Flo could hear the jabble of this talk continually even above the streaming of the willow leaves, which were grey-green and slim. They whispered rather than talked. It was some time before Flo realized that the farmer, while he was working and talking, was also watching all that part of the farm that could be seen from where they were. But one June evening he interrupted the sticking in of the willow rods which they had cut to hold up the Sherwood peas, and said he thought they'd "best go an' see how Jenny is. Oo went into the willers three-quarters of an hour sin' an' oo's near 'er time."

Jenny was an excitable red, rather small, which Flo had

only gone near once. The moment her stool had been put down out had shot the cow's near rear leg and away the stool had bounced scaringly.

"Keep away or oo'll pounce you over the boskin," Mr. Nadin had warned, Flo remembered as they went slowly along behind the western sallows. She was surprised that he knew exactly at which path to turn in, for there were several other cattle among the bushes at different places. But there Jenny lay in a kind of nest among lengthly drawn grass.

"Some folks allus takes 'em in. I reckon as it's best, if weather is owt like, ta let 'em get through as is natural to 'em," said the farmer slowly, stopping ten yards from the cow, partly hidden. "Oo'll be a bit yet," was his judgment. "We'll non disturb 'er."

Flo stared, a strange inquisitiveness setting up a quivering inside her. She wanted eagerly to go nearer, to watch everything, but the farmer turned back with such calm acceptance that she would follow that she could not stay.

"However did you know?" she asked, unwittingly by her tone betraying herself. "I never saw her go."

"Half of farming's watchin'," said the old man cryptically, dragging a dead alder bough across the path. Then his placid glance passed slowly over the cattle scattered about the field.

"Are you sure she'll be all right?"

"Why not? She seems to be doing nicely. You wouldna like ta be bothered at that business; less disturbance the better."

Flo did not know where to look. The thoughts started by his plain statement made her feel ashamed, and more excited, yet awed. She was silent, wondering what it would be like to have another life inside herself, and whether it really hurt. Would it hurt Jenny? Why had she gone in there?

"Do they always go away like that?"

"Ay; I reckon it's instinct . . . t'others 'ud be that inquisitive, oo'd have no chance."

Flo realized that she was being as bad for inquisitiveness as he said the other cattle would have been had they known. She determined not to ask any more, but she found it hard to go on in silence sticking willow sticks in.

"They're non the best sort o' sticks, these," said Mr. Nadin,

as though he had completely forgotten Jenny. "It's on'y that they're handy an' easy to get."

"Why, what's the matter with them?" asked Flo perfunctorily.

"They'll prob'ly grow better than the peas; we're plantin' a willer fence!" He gave a throat chuckle, but Flo hardly realized what he meant. She kept glancing towards the dead bough that he had left. The old man worked on steadily, and at last she could keep silent no longer.

"Are you sure it wouldn't be better if you were there?"

"Nay," unhurriedly. "It's a job as they manages very well theirsels if they've sense. Jenny's a touchy piece . . . oo'd happen be more upset if I were there."

"Oo, I'd sooner have someone," exclaimed Flo. She stopped, colouring, but the farmer went on with his work.

"They've made it into a big business naa-adays," he remarked thoughtfully. "Doctors an' nurses an' twilight sleep, or whatever they call it; but I dunna know as anybody's any better. It's a nat'ral thing, an' I reckon as nature knows best road . . . whether it's human beings or beasts."

For a few moments Flo forgot Jenny in thinking about this. No, she decided, she'd have doctors and nurses, or she wouldn't feel safe; probably she wouldn't feel safe even then. She wondered how long it would be before she had a baby; would she ever have one? Did she really want one? She shuddered again as she imagined movement inside herself, movement over which she would have no control; movement with no consideration about what hurt it might cause.

"Do they always manage all right when they're left?" she demanded so unexpectedly that the farmer, who was thinking that he ought to have soaked the peas in red-lead to keep mice off, straightened and looked at her curiously.

"Does what manage . . .? Oh, Jenny you mean? Eh, we'll take a peep as we goo back."

He worked for half an hour longer, then slowly led towards the pathway. Part-dusk had come on them almost unawares, and there was a hush everywhere. The cattle had ceased ripping grass and were lying down; even the blackbirds and thrushes seemed to have grown tired earlier than usual, preferring to save their song for four o'clock in the morning.

Flo, without knowing, walked on tiptoes. As they got nearer Mr. Nadin went more gently, and he lifted the bough as if he were an eavesdropper. Flo was startled by a moan, a moan of such abject pain that her heart hesitated in its beat. Jenny lay flat on her side, her head extended on a tussock. Again she moaned weakly, and the moan was a question as to why she should have such pain. Flo wanted to run and kneel and comfort her, but Mr. Nadin was in front with his arm crooked before her. From his attitude she gathered that all he wanted her to do was keep still and silent. He knelt with ease and quietude which at any other time might have surprised her. Dimly in the poor light she saw protruding from the womb the rear half of a red and white calf. Its legs were bunched inward, not yet released. She had expected to see a head and stood tense, wondering if the calf were dead. Her impulse to comfort Jenny was forgotten; she was absorbed in staring. The farmer spoke soothingly: "Steady lass, steady; try agen."

He clasped the calf gently in his large hands. Jenny moaned again, unaware of watchers, entirely occupied with pain. The muscles of the womb contracted and relaxed and the farmer tenderly and skilfully manipulated and pulled. Despite her intentness, Flo was surprised all at once to see the calf whole, large-headed, sleekly wet and foolish looking. But it was alive, for it moved its head, feebly experimenting with the space and freedom which it was just beginning to sense vaguely all round. Jenny stirred, relieved, attempting to look round. The farmer lifted the soft ungainly youngster and, moving carefully, placed it where Jenny could touch it. She smelt it curiously, briefly, half afraid, then abruptly turning her head away blew through her nostrils. A spasm passed over her as if she were about to get up, but she did not. She smelt the calf again, more carefully, and gave a tentative lick. The youngster moaned very low, and stirred slightly. Out came Jenny's tongue once more, laving experimentally, till all at once she seemed to realize the truth and began to lick with eager thoroughness. The calf moaned a second time, as if complaining, but Jenny took no notice, continuing industriously.

"She'll do; good lady," said Mr. Nadin, moving gently away.

"Shall you leave her?" asked Flo, incredulous, feeling a longing in her fingers to caress the calf.

"Ay, we can move her in the mornin'," said the farmer complacently.

Unwillingly Flo followed. The bush was dragged into place and they went on through the dusk towards the house.

"Shall you go first thing?" asked Flo, still inquisitive and eager. "I wish I could go."

"It'll be all over; there'll be nothing then," he answered, beginning to put on his indoors moroseness.

In bed Flo lay awake for more than an hour thinking of Jenny and her calf in the willows, and then her mind accepted thoughts too intimate for any other time and condition than night and isolation. She felt that she had grown older, and that she would never be quite so carefree and thoughtless as she had been before. She woke to the first jangle of the bell, and instantly again thought of Jenny. She dressed hurriedly and went down quickly but as silent as she could, and slipped past the partly closed kitchen door into the yard. The farmer in the half-light was surrounded by cattle moving slowly in from Three Oaks over the lane. He swung up both arms suddenly, shooing dalliers into the right doorways.

"Ha . . . have you been to Jenny yet?" Flo asked hesitantly.

"Non yet; after milking."

She sped back and took up her duties. Her milking had improved steadily and she did five or six every morning, according to how Bert and Clem worked. This morning she was under her sixth when the farmer came up the gangway and asked how long she would be. She had only just begun. Clem was balancing his stool over the wooden harness peg that did as a rack. The farmer asked him to finish for her.

"Where you goin'; ta see the new cawfe?" He grinned and winked at Flo. His attitude sullied her excitement. "What is it?" he asked.

"Bull," Mr. Nadin answered, laconic.

"God, another! Ten out of the last bloody fourteen. What the hell . . .?"

But the farmer was leading into the yard. Full light had come quickly, or so it seemed to Flo after her stay in the

shippon. The pasture was marked with darker green tracks where the cattle had walked through the grey dew.

"Why didn't she come up with the rest?" asked Flo.

"I brought them up myself so she wouldna be disturbed," the farmer explained. He went in a line for the alder bough, but when they went through, the nest was empty. They saw marks of the birth and slotted prints where Jenny must have stepped not long before, the prints clear, not yet filled with moisture. They went through on to the shelving beach, and to the right was Jenny with the calf nosing for paps under her forelegs. On catching sight of them Jenny started away, nearly bowling the unsteady youngster over. It recovered and went jerkily after her as if all its legs were stilts.

"Oo allus were wild," said Mr. Nadin disapprovingly. "You stay, an' I'll get top side, then oo'll go through th' willers." He went into the little path and Jenny stopped and stared at Flo. The calf began again to nuzzle blindly under the dewlap, but felt instinctively nearer and nearer towards the udder. After a few minutes Flo saw Mr. Nadin step out of the bushes twenty yards on the other side. Jenny facing partly to Flo, partly towards the lake, apparently did not see him. He moved up and called softly, "Coom up, lass." Jenny tossed her head and sprang round. Before either of them had made a move to intercept, she was in the water trotting nervously straight outward. Twelve yards out, immersed to her knees, she paused tensely, uttering a brief, plaintive "Moo!" The calf staggering haphazardly seemed to understand and moved quicker.

"Stop yer: turn back!" yelled Mr. Nadin, waving long arms and suddenly running into the water obliquely towards the pair.

Jenny turned fearfully a little from him and plunged spasmodically onward. The calf struggled after her. Flo scarcely moved; later she was muscle sore from having kept so stiff. She saw the farmer suddenly stop his impetuous dash. He stood still in two feet of water and cajolingly called, but Jenny plunged on, deeper and deeper, deaf, controlled only by the will to escape. With her dewlap submerged she paused a second time, momentarily, glancing round and uttering a second low cry. The puny youngster was belly

deep. Flo held her hands clenched, certain that he would drown. But he went on with head held out and big mute eyes fixed uncomprehendingly.

"Turn back, you young fool; you'll drown 'im," shouted the farmer, helpless and beside himself.

It only made Jenny go on. Soon the calf's back was awash. Flo could not believe that he was swimming; it seemed like a miracle after his so recent birth, which to her had also seemed something like a miracle.

"Can he swim?" she demanded foolishly.

"Seems like it," answered Mr. Nadin in his old slow manner, resigned, wading towards her and coming out on the weed and shingle, though all the time keeping his stare over the water.

Soon both animals were swimming. The calf lagged badly, Jenny now and then appearing to delay and encourage him. Their course curved a little, as if Jenny had made up her mind where she would land on the opposite side. But it was half a mile across and to the anxious watchers looked much farther.

"Cawfe'll never do it, no'ow," said Mr. Nadin. "The silly rantin' bitch."

Flo stared, all apprehension. She did not want to watch the calf drown, yet she could not turn away. Now only the heads were to be seen, Jenny's horns standing wide and clear. Beside her the bull-calf's head was insignificant. Although close in shore the water was still, far out there were tiny travelling ripples. Sometimes they made it seem as though the calf had disappeared, and Flo held her breath. Then again she would see him, still moving slowly, very slowly, after the mother.

"No use worritin' naa, anyway," said Mr. Nadin lifting his cap a little and scratching the centre of his crown with the third finger of the same hand, and then beginning to shake his boots free of mud and water one after the other comically.

"Is it a big loss if they drown?" queried Flo.

"It's non th' cawfe . . . but I dunna want ta lose Jenny," he said thoughtfully, standing stiffly and staring again. "By gum, it's a long way," he added, impressed anew by the traverse.

The swimmers had got so far that it was now only the cow's

horned head that they could make out with certainty. Flo wondered why the farmer hadn't hurried off to help at the far side; then she realized what a long way it was round. And, of course, anyone on the opposite shore might only scare Jenny back again.

"Cawfe's still with oo, I reckon," said Mr. Nadin, as if it were incredible.

Flo stared till her eyes hurt. Sometimes she thought she saw the calf, but most times not. She did not reply. How long they had been staring neither of them knew. The farmer for rest looked away, over the dam to the western hill rampart. When he stared across the water again it seemed as though Jenny might be higher. He remembered that it was shallow there, the shallow extended for a hundred yards, a kind of submerged island. Perhaps she was resting, waiting for her calf . . . if it had not already gone under. And then he plainly saw the calf, and he understood that Jenny was not resting, but had won through the choppy central water and was in the smooth, approaching land. Flo, not as tall, could not see so well, but she noticed the set mask of the farmer's face begin to relax, and then a faint smile came.

Flo on tiptoe stared and saw Jenny emerge, very distant and small; and then the bull-calf, incredibly tiny. Jenny shepherded him ashore, and on the first green he flopped as though his legs had given way. Jenny put her head down and must have been licking him.

"By God, the little beggar!" exclaimed Mr. Nadin with such happiness that Flo's eyes filled.

"Will they be all right?"

Before she got a reply they were disturbed by a shouted, "Gosh, that beats everything, doesn't it?" and turning together they saw Dick Goldbourn urging his chair from the direction of the road. He had approached within fifteen yards unnoticed. He had just been coming round the corner of the willows a quarter-mile away when Jenny took to the water. "What is it?" he asked. "By jove, I should christen it Captain Webb; I've never seen a swimmer like it."

The farmer said he would go round, but if the pair seemed all right, most likely he would leave them to recover in their own way. Later he would take the boys to bring them back

when Jenny had got calmer. He trudged off towards the dam.

"How old is it?" asked Dick.

"Only last night . . . I saw it happen," said Flo. He had never seen her quite so animated. "You wouldn't think it could . . . it looked so very . . . very shaky," she went on, unconscious of her fervour. "He . . . he seemed too weak even to *moo*. I made sure he'd drown!"

"Don't you think he ought to be called Captain Webb?"

She laughed; she did not quite see that point. But her own thoughts were moving quickly.

"Isn't it different from an ordinary baby? That would have drowned straight away."

"It couldn't have stood the cold even," said Dick, hoping to make her go on. "But then a baby hasn't a coat like that."

"Of course not. Wouldn't it be funny?" She laughed again, entirely forgetful of herself; then all at once she turned grave. "Do you think it's because it hurt so much; made Jenny so she didn't . . . sort of mad?" she asked, staring anxiously.

"Eh," said Dick, not quite following. "D'you mean what made her do it? What makes cows do anything? They're the silliest beasts."

Flo looked dissatisfied and he hastened to ask if she hadn't heard of cows jumping fences and all kinds of things, for no sensible reason. But she hadn't. Her animation was ebbing. "I must be going," she said. "Missis will wonder what's become of me. She'll be mad."

"Not if you tell her what happened," he said, turning his chair and travelling along the beach back the way he had come. Flo did not speak, so he went on: "It must be over half a mile; I bet Bert won't believe. I'm glad I saw it."

"I hope they're all right," said Flo gently.

At the bay by the boathouse Dick stopped. "When are you visiting the market again?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Flo. "I must go." And she ran up the bank. He called, "Good-bye," but got no return.

Chapter 16

CAPTAIN WEBB got over his exhaustion and seemed not to have been affected. But Jenny's milk was short. Because of her wildness also Mr. Nadin decided to sell her, and he and Clem drove her to auction the following Thursday. Captain Webb bawled disconsolately. He made much more fuss over the loss of his mother than he had done about his great swim. With Flo he became a favourite, and whenever she could get away to his pen she fondled his head or let him suck her fingers.

"You'll have 'im mardy as a kitten," said Mr. Nadin in a pleased humour.

Flo didn't like the name "Captain Webb". It sounded too old. But all the rest took it up, for Dick had found Bert in the boathouse and had passed the name on to him. Flo, when no one else was about, called the calf "Jerry", because she thought it suited his inconsequence. Three days after Jenny had gone he seemed to have forgotten that he had ever had a mother, and he accepted everything and everybody with bland, big-eyed innocence. Flo wrote home about his great adventure, describing him fully and telling how greedy he was. Since leaving home she had written to her mother about once a week, and once she had written to Ivy, but she had had no reply from either. As long as she could remember, Flo had only known her mother write two letters, both when relatives had died; and these letters had only been got out with a great deal of worry and labour. So that Flo did not expect much from her mother, but she thought that Ivy might have made an effort to write. It was hard sending letters each week without getting any reply, yet Flo persisted because she got a certain amount of comfort out of steadily thinking of home, as she had to do when she wrote. However, ten days after her letter about Jerry she was thrilled when she got in from washing the churns to see on the mantleshef, leaning against the tin tea-canister with the picture of Queen Victoria on, a blue envelope marked with her mother's untidy heavy blotched writing.

"Summat's goin' off. It'll non be a love-letter by looks on it," said Mrs. Nadin as Flo reached up.

Flo was tempted to tear it open at once; then after a moment's hesitation, she thrust it in the neck of her blue working frock. It was such an event that she felt she wanted to enjoy it alone.

"Dunna you want ta read it? Happen you've had a fortune left," said Mrs. Nadin; and next with unexpected intuition, "Goo upstairs an' get it done wi'. You'll ne'er work till tha's got the guts out of it."

"Can I?"

"Can a cat lick its backside? 'Course it can. Off with you, but dunna tek aw day."

Flo ran up and shut the bedroom door and went to the window and sat on the sill. Her fingers shook and tore the envelope jaggedly. There was a single thick sheet on which the writing wavered at one place under the blue lines, then above, but hardly anywhere exactly on them. It read:

Dear Flo,

Mrs. Howels says why havent you write you promise before You went and are you Beeing good girl. Taking care of them cloathes? I got got a cold but nott to bad Mrs. Baybut got baby. boy Ivy yu know on Twntysix. When you sending sume money stead Of tellin about JERRY ME you working work an get noathin attall better be Home & I, think doant you Hoping this finds as it leeves mee your Mother Millicent Royer. Write Mrs. H. PS an doant frget some cash
XXXXXX mother.

When yu comin home.

Flo turned it over in the hope that there might be something on the other side but there were only three grease spots. She could imagine it being laboriously written on the table after tea; with Ivy off-handedly tossing over suggestions, but not really helping. Whatever did that part about Ivy mean? Had Mrs. Baybutt had a baby boy; or had Ivy got another young man? Of course, Flo hadn't written to Mrs. Howell, and she didn't intend to. Wasn't it Mrs. Howell's fault that there was no money? How could she send money when she hardly got any? Flo read the letter through again, and this time the two phrases that stood out as if written in block

capitals were : "better be Home," and "When yu comin home." How could she go home when she hadn't even enough for the fare? Suddenly she let the letter waver to the carpet and sobbed. For nearly five minutes she kept her face hidden, thinking of home and her mother and Ivy and the hopelessness of ever being able to go back. Then gradually she felt better, and looked out and saw the lake and the hills and recognized their familiarity. She remembered that she had only come up to read the letter, yet how long had she been? She hurriedly straightened her hair and smoothed her eyebrows with her handkerchief and started downstairs. On the landing Dot met her.

"What have you been doing?" she demanded in a disagreeable tone.

"Missis sent me," said Flo shortly, and went on down.

"Don't speak to me like that," shouted Dot.

As soon as Flo went in at the kitchen Mrs. Nadin started : "Well, how are they? Sister had any illegitimate kids yet?"

"They want to know when I'm going home," Flo answered. "And when I'm sending some money."

"It's not till six months, first holiday . . . three days . . . accordin' ta what they said in papers as they sent. I'm payin' you what they said, an' t'other goos ta them for togs an' things. How done they reckon you con send 'em owt?" demanded Mrs. Nadin.

"I don't know," said Flo meekly.

"Damn soft arrangement. We could 'a fitted you up wi' clothes as would 'a done. Dot's got more stuff than oo knows what ta do wi'."

"Yes," said Flo.

"If you'd like ta send 'em a few eggs or summat, I'll see what we con spare."

This only made Flo feel more homesick. She was relieved when she was told to go and start cleaning the cabin. There instead of working in her usual steady way she went at it fiercely, brushing the matting till the place was misty with dust, then dropping on a chair and staring through the window, all her energy and intention spent. She knew that she was giving way as she ought not to, pitying herself, but she abandoned herself and hoped that Dot would come, then

they could have a row. However, Dot did not come, and eventually Flo started dusting, giving everything the merest flick, just to be able to say that she'd done it. When she looked out again she saw Dick Goldbourn come from behind the willows at the left end of the little beach and work himself across and go behind the willows again. Despite her mood she was impressed by his uncomplaining intentness. He had troubles, yet there he was making the best that he could of things. Her thoughts lost centre in herself, and she began to think of his life; her sympathy flowed outward after him. Surely he needed someone to look after him. Wasn't that a job that she could do instead of carrying on hopelessly at Prettyfield? And then the thought came that the only way really to help him was to marry him. The only person that could really help him would have to be his wife. Suppose . . . suppose that it were possible! She gazed hard through the willows where he had gone, only she could not see him. Nevertheless the more she thought about marrying him the more attractive it seemed. How nice it would be to have a man who had a lot of money. Then she would be able to send home whatever she wanted. Her imagination took charge and she saw herself in furs in a Rolls driving up Balloon Street and all the neighbours watching and envying her. She remembered the woman in the poppy jumper that once she had seen on the yacht. And suddenly she laughed and stood up from the chair quickly.

"If ever it could," she murmured, half in prayer, but also humorously.

She felt better and walked back to the house with the brush and dusters.

"Bin decoratin' as well as cleanin'?" asked Mrs. Nadin.

But after tea she brought twelve big brown eggs out of the pantry and six oatcakes baked the previous day and told Flo to wrap them up and get them out of her way. So Flo wrote a short reply to her mother, not saying anything about money, and wrapped each egg separately in old newspaper and tucked them tightly into a tin with the oatcakes on top and addressed the parcel for Clem to take when he went with the morning's milk. She thought what a surprise it would be for her mother, and this was pleasant. Then when she had put away the

string bag and paper she sat by the fire and thought again how she might marry Dick Goldbourn and so be able to send lots of other things home.

"Thinkin' of deenin'?" asked Mrs. Nadin. "You look about as gay as a soused duck."

"No," said Flo, caught. "I . . . I was thinking how nice it would be to have lots of money."

"Hm!" muttered the farmer's wife. "There's more things as matters than brass. Keep your mouth shut an' your bowels open . . . there's two things as I've told you on afore. An' by God, see as you pick reet kind o' a man; if you pick one like I've gotten, you'll find as no amount o' brass makes up."

Mr. Nadin was in his chair at the opposite side of the hearth, but he gave no sign of having heard.

"A bit o' brass as well met have made it better, but thee an' no brass nother," shouted his wife at him. "It's a wonder it hasn't driven me daft."

He puffed smoke towards the grate and watched it draw out in a smooth S-curve up the great square chimney.

"I were thinkin' o' tekkin' you out for th' day next Bakewell Show," he announced slowly, "but now I winna."

"You great clod. Thinkin'!" stormed Mrs. Nadin. "A lot o' thinkin' you've done, I bet. Moor like thinkin' how the hell you con pinch away theer thisen."

The farmer turned his gaze towards the fire again and went on smoking. Flo was thankful for these brisk exchanges; they had enabled her to recover from the temporary confusion that had come over her when Mrs. Nadin had so promptly jumped on to the subject of husbands and brass. She wondered what would have been said had she confessed that she had been thinking of marrying Dick Goldbourn. The clock ticked on with slow grave patience. For half a minute no one spoke; then it was Mrs. Nadin again:

"Never wed a farmer, Flo. It's all muck an' sweat, an' work never done, an' nowt for it. Ta hell with it."

"Oh," said Flo.

"No," was the determined retort. "I'd sooner 'a wed an undertaker. I should 'a known he'd 'a looked after me when I were dead, chose 'ow, if it were on'y for advertisin'. But

'im," with the greatest scorn, "I'd as lief think as he'd chuck me out on th' midden."

She got up energetically and started to reach the supper things out of the side-cupboard.

"Tha met do worse than marry a farmer," announced Mr. Nadin unexpectedly, looking at Flo over the cherry-wood bowl of his pipe out of which a grey whisp of smoke oozed. "There's summat in it as is in nowt else."

"Thee shut thi trap . . . tha'll catch cold," snapped his wife. His teeth clicked back on his pipe stem. But Flo thought over his words all through supper.

The following morning Jack Knight came and took Captain Webb away. He was bigger and older than the first calf and was not put into a sack, but was shoved into the front of the old float, Jack standing behind, simply barring him in with his legs. Flo was washing the churns and buckets. She could not resist going across to fondle her friend's head over the float side.

"I didn't know you were having him," she said, glancing up. "Take care of him, won't you?"

"If I didna intend ta do that I wouldna be tekkin' him, would I, Emmott?" looking at the farmer, then back at Flo. "You mun come an' see him in a two-three week when I've fattened him a bit."

"Ay, he knows how ta fatten a cawfe," the farmer confirmed. "I thought o' keepin' the little beggar misen . . . that's why I didna let 'im goo same time as Jenny . . . but there's haytime, an' I've enought ta do."

"If Bert an' Clem gave more time, an' non so much ta fishin' an' such, you'd manage better," said Jack sympathetically.

"Ay," Mr. Nadin agreed, "they're non much o' farmers. Flo 'ere's more keen nor them. If on'y oo'd bin born wi' trousers, oo'd 'a bin reet."

Flo turned abruptly back to the trough. She heard their talk going on, but she could not make it out because of the continual pouring from the pipe. She dared a glance and found Jack staring her way and she would have given her turban to have known what was being said. Catching her glance, Jack raised his hand in his usual flip, then clapped the

reins on the front-board and began to trundle away. Flo waited to see the last of Jerry, and, when the float had gone, all at once she felt sad, as if Jack had taken something that really was her's. But, of course, nothing was her's, she thought bitterly as she swished water round in a churn, her arm thrust in up to the shoulder. No money; no nothing. She envied Jack Knight his apparently carefree life; his own boss, and no one to worry him.

"He's a rum lad," commented the farmer as he went past to the house.

Rain came, a pleasant warm drizzle, that soaked the earth steadily for all of one week-end. At once the grass responded, as though joyfully. The breezes off the lake previously had ruffled the meadows; now the grass began to sway gracefully, and in the stronger gusts whole fields would bow one way as though being combed. Mr. Nadin liked to stand at the gates and watch.

"That's a grand bit o' grass," he told Flo, as she stood with him looking into Lake Meadow. She was amused, because she had never thought of grass as being anything but commonplace, more or less the same everywhere. But Mr. Nadin maintained that there "isna a better lookin' field than that onywhere."

In ten days even to her inexperience the change in the field was great. She saw the seed-heads coming and noticed for the first time how they began to alter the field's colour. All simple green before, now it began to darken and to show grey sheen; buffs and browns appeared almost as if some great painter were shading them in during the nights. A few buttercups gleamed—not many, but just enough to contrast with the few scarlet sorrel docks and rufus "berried" burnet. Also a scattering of moon daisies bloomed, and Flo thought how nice their name was. It was the farmer that named all these plants for her, explaining that they were weeds. "But it wouldna be like a meadow 'bout 'em," smiling a little in excuse of his liking them. "We mun fettle th' mower, an' Monday, if it's owt like, we'll start."

Flo was rather excited, because she learned that they would all be needed. It would be a change from the indoors monotony.

"Now she's here, she can do my share; I don't want burning like a gypsy," said Dot.

Mr. Nadin grunted, but in a way that said plainly that he'd see whether she went out or not. Mrs. Nadin said, "You want brunnin' wi' summat hotter, mi girl; fine big letters on your back, 'Too lazy ta spit'."

Clem laughed. They were having their evening meal. Dot threw the dregs of her tea-cup over him.

"It's the only sort of vulgar humour you could see," she said cuttingly.

"Vulgar mi backside!" exclaimed Mrs. Nadin. "Tit-i-vatin', hoity-toity, powder mi nose an' lick mi bottom. I say what I mean an' them as dunna like it con lump it. Plain speech an' no frills wi' underhand work beneath 'em, that's my way."

"If you'd only follow your own motto of keeping your mouth shut, it would be better for all of us," cried Dot, worked up. "You've no idea what folks say . . ."

"Let 'em say till they bust an' be damned," snapped Mrs. Nadin. "They'll non say as our Dot is too proud ta goo hay-makin', anyway. I'll see ta that."

When Flo thought that they should all be pleased with the fine way in which the grass had come on, bad temper seemed only to increase. Lacing his boots at six o'clock in the morning to go with Clem to start mowing in Lake Meadow, Bert said, "The sooner it's done the better; I hope to God it's a good time."

"Ay," Clem grunted. "Muckin' the stuff about for months is a ruddy mug's game."

They went out and Flo was told, instead of bothering with the few jobs that she usually did beforehand, to go straight away to help with milking. She was astonished half an hour later to hear Dot walk into the thirteen shippon. Flo had not known that Dot could milk. Certainly Dot had not milked since Flo had been taken on.

"You'd best take Yorkie an' Polly, they're easiest," said the farmer, looking round from his stool in the gloom at the shippon end.

That was a triumph for Flo; already she was considered a better milker than Dot. Going with her bucket to the churn

unconsciously she adopted almost a swagger. As she stood in the yard pouring bubbly milk into the sieve she heard the queer chattering of the mower, which sounded angry, too, at its job, though it had been idle since the July before. After milking, and before feeding the hens, Flo ran to the gate to see what it was like. The grass lay in heavy rows all brushed, as it were, obliquely; and she was pleased by the colour, sappy pale at the bottom, shading greener with some blue, then buff, brown, and red and yellow at the top, so that the swaths looked rather like long pale rainbows, rainbows plucked from the sky and laid straight and wilting. What a funny idea that was, Flo thought, and she wished that she had someone to pass it on to. Jack Knight might have understood. Then the mower stopped suddenly, and she ran back lest she should be seen. Dot was in the yard and caught her.

"No wonder I have to help, if that's how you work."

"I wasn't away a minute," said Flo.

"Of course you were. You have too much of your own way."

"How now?" exclaimed Mr. Nadin, putting his head unexpectedly from the shippon. "You're allus fallin' out, you two."

"Falling out!" exclaimed Dot. "I'm trying to teach her her place as you ought to."

"Oo's a good worker about th' farm," said the farmer. "Best way ta drive a hoss isna allus ta be whippin'."

His head went in again, and Dot turned and walked towards the house, stiffly indicating that she had done as much outside as she was going to do. Flo had expected that the hay would keep them terribly busy all day, but after the early morning cut everything went on very much as it did normally. Lake Meadow was simply left with its long swaths, like a triangular cloth with a plain centre and a dozen frilly rows all round. The sun shone and a pleasant breeze came across, bringing to Flo the sappy odour of the hay's first drying. Then in the evening she heard the mower chattering again, and being free she went out and was put to following with a rake to move the swaths out of the way at the corners, or when the knife got stowed. Clem was driving with Colonel walking by the standing grass and Job pulling by his side. They worked

unevenly, and Clem swore often, but Flo was fascinated by the ever-falling grass. It shivered at the touch of the guide arm which divided the grass that was fated from that which would stay for the next round. Then suddenly it lost its upright, debonair stand, sheered off at the ankles without warning by the knife which seemed to Flo to work like a saw. It was sad, she thought, and rather unfair. What a pity to kill all the flowers. They fell with the grass in a greeny-buff wave, and the pollen that shook off made her think of the fine spray that wind sometimes lifted off the waves in Morecambe Bay.

Mr. Nadin was mowing the field edges with a scythe. Bert was near the gate with a cutter-blade fixed on a spindle-legged trestle, touching up with a file the edges of the triangular knife sections. When Flo got near the gate on her sixth round she saw Dick Goldbourn there. He waved, and she remembered how she had thought it would be nice to marry him. Suppose she made up her mind, she thought, what chance had she? What chance had any girl like herself to marry men better off than themselves? She knew it happened in books, but . . .

The mower knife stuttered, jerked ineffectually, stopped. In front of it lay a wad of grass fallen forward instead of back.

"What the hell!" demanded Clem. "That's what you're there for." He yelled to the horses to back. The pole tipped up awkwardly between them. Clem got down and cleared the knife, showing her the chewed grass. "The bloody knife's as blunt as hell, anyway, but you canna expect it to cut that."

"I'm sorry," said Flo.

Instantly his mood changed. He grinned. Unexpectedly with his bent forefinger, he stroked her under the chin. She back-stepped hurriedly, her feet tripping, so that she sat down suddenly, foolishly.

"Oh my, I've got my pink drawers on!" he jibed, turning aside as though shocked.

She felt like throwing the rake at him. He spoilt the job for her. She wondered if Dick Goldbourn had seen.

They kept on till damp rose in a fine mist all over the field, and Flo felt the coolness soaking her shoes. When she went

to the gate Bert had gone in to prepare feed for the horses, but Dick was still there.

"You must be weary, or I'd ask you to help me up the hill," she was surprised to hear him say.

She exclaimed that she could do that, anyway; would be glad to. It was slightly dusky, but she could see his dark eyes looking steadily. This excited her somewhat; made her feel a little guilty. Supposing that he could guess what she had been thinking!

"No, I can't let you," he was saying.

"If you go now it will be all right," she said hastily. "I can't when all the others have gone in."

He turned and she pushed him over the rough gate place. Down the lane he trundled himself easily; all she did was rest her hand on the chair back. For twenty yards he did not speak. She heard over the hedge quite close the farmer, sharpening his scythe.

"How do you get on with them all?" asked Dick, a little husky.

"Get on? . . . All right."

"With Bert and Clem . . . are they decent?"

"Yes," she answered, wondering.

"I saw you," he said, apparently with difficulty. "He did something to you and you jumped and fell."

"It was the swath."

He went a little quicker down hill to the bridge. They were between the willows where it was more misty and darker.

"Perhaps you're wondering why I asked," Dick began again. "But I don't trust Clem. I thought he might have been up to tricks. I suppose it's none of my business, but . . . well, you helped me."

"I never feel quite safe with him, but he's never interfered before," Flo answered. "He's always out."

"I'm glad."

He rolled over the bridge and Flo began to push. Between the high banks at the steepest part it was almost dark; then they came out on the level into clearness and it seemed lighter than in the valley. They stopped by the five-sided toll-house which was now only a dwelling house. Through the small side window the leaping gleam of a good fire beckoned.

"Mustn't it be nice . . . Like a doll's house," said Flo.

"D'you think so? You're very good. We should see more of each other . . . if you're not bored by a crock."

"Oh, no," said Flo earnestly, looking intently, then quickly staring up the road to Moss. "You're not an old crock. I . . ." she almost said, "I like you", but stopped. "I . . . I'll be in the hay a lot; perhaps I'll see you there, so close to the lake."

"They don't want me, being no good."

"They don't think of that," she emphasized. "They all say you're good an' . . . an' what a pity it is."

"Would you like me to be there?"

"Yes, of course." Her colour deepened a bit. She wondered if it were possible that he was hinting at more than he said. "You shouldn't think you're no good. I often remember what you said, about making the best . . . and . . . and it's helped me. I wish I could help you more."

He laughed, for some reason that she could not guess.

"You're always helping. Haven't I brought you all this way now? If everybody did things like you I shouldn't mind." He paused, seemed inclined to say more, looked at her in a curious, intimate way that made her glance waver and drop, and eventually laughed again. "Perhaps I'm wrong, but lots of folk do things, but most of them because they're sorry and feel they *ought* to help. But it's mighty few that I feel help because they like me. That's how I feel with you, anyway. If you were a bit older I . . . well, I guess I shouldn't say it."

"Say what?"

"Well, I might ask you to marry me." He laughed again, unexpectedly patting her hand in a playful way, and added hastily, "Take no notice. I'm an old fool."

She felt hot and guilty, as if he might have guessed her thoughts. She did not know what to answer, yet knew that she must answer quickly. Almost as if it were someone else she heard herself say, "I must go. They'll wonder what's come of me. Misses'll be on to me." She stepped out of his reach. "Good bye."

"I'll see you again, Flo," he called in a soft, deep tone.

She ran. She felt that she must; quicker and quicker down

the steep lane. The cool air rushed by her ears and suddenly her foot was on a stone, went over, all her weight on her twisted ankle. There was pain. She fell in a sprawling slide a little sideways, the road like a file rasping hands and knees. She lay for a moment, partly winded, then sat up, putting her hands to her right breast. It felt bruised and enlarged, but the greater pain was in her right ankle. She rested for half a minute before trying to get up. Using her hands on the bank, she hauled herself up. She could hardly bear any weight on her right foot. The instant she tried pain shot to her waist and she went faint. Her hands and knees she ignored. She groped in the hedge bottom for a bleached stick, a piece of old barked ash. With this she began hopping towards the farm, wondering what she should say. After fifty yards she was getting more expert, holding the stick stiffly, hardly needing her right foot. She hopped into the yard, but there was no one there. She hesitated at the gate to the house, smelling the hay and thinking how useless she had made herself, though she knew that it was not a break, only a severe sprain. But she had no idea how long it would take to get better. She limped up the path and through the open door.

"Hoppin' Lucifer, what's got thee?" demanded Mrs. Nadin.

"I fell," said Flo. All at once she swayed and dropped on the chair just inside.

"Eh, what's up?" exclaimed Mrs. Nadin, hurriedly crossing the kitchen. Everybody stared. "What's up?" Mrs. Nadin looked down, and then stooped and lifted Flo's boot in a business-like, unsympathetic way.

"Twisted," said Flo.

"You want a cold-water bandage," advised Mr. Nadin, who had come from his chair more slowly. "It's begun ta swell."

"You dunna say," exclaimed Mrs. Nadin, plucking at the laces. She knelt with the foot on her knee. "Bring cold water, Dot. Let's have your stockin' off." Flo fumbled, trying to keep her skirt down. "Eh, it winna kill if they see thi breeches," said Mrs. Nadin impatiently. "Tha's messed thi knees up, an aw. What the heck wert doin'?"

She bathed the ankle and tightly bound it with a long strip of soaked linen. Hands and knees she bathed with salt water, and when Flo flinched she told her to "hold thisel' still. This is nowt ta what tha'll get when tha gooes ta hell." But Flo felt confidence in her and in the farmer who stood over them till all was done. In the night her ankle throbbled and she could not sleep. Her breast had gone a reddy blue underneath and she would have liked to have bathed that also, but she was too shy to say anything. She cupped her hand under it and the warmth seemed to ease the soreness. In the morning the bell jangled as usual. She sat up, not knowing what to do. Almost at once she heard Mrs. Nadin's unmistakable quick flat tread and the door snapped open.

"How d'you feel? You're a bonnie one. Scatterbrained as a pullet, eh? I canna mess naa, but after breakfast we'll try bathin' wi' hot." She inspected the foot with her candle. "Eh, that's non so bad; you'll be able to milk any'ow. I've brought thee a carpet slipper."

Flo hobbled, therefore, as best she could, though milking was easier than she had expected because she could hold her foot straight out under the cows' bellies. Bert and Clem were out mowing again, so that Dot had to milk more. She never asked Flo about her foot, but ignored her, as if her injury were bogus. Mr. Nadin told Flo to manage what she could. "Let missis fettle it; oo's a good 'un."

After breakfast the foot was bathed with hot water and then with cold, and it began to feel easier. Flo was left to clean the brass candlesticks and the knives, forks and spoons. Then on a chair at the sink she peeled potatoes and after that Mrs. Nadin left her on the settee with a great pile of stockings.

"It's well to be some folks; I think I'll strain my ankle," said Dot.

Only the sun was shining, and Mr. Nadin said that next day the first hay would be ready for turning and Flo felt that she had made a fool of herself. Why, after leaving Dick, had she run down hill like that? She had told Mrs. Nadin that it was because she was late and knew that they would be wondering what had become of her. She wondered if Dick would hear; and whether he would come and see her. But of course not.

And next day, Wednesday, he came.

"You don't mind, Mrs. Nadin? But I feel it was my fault for letting her help me."

"If she conna stick on her feet, it's a beggar," commented Mrs. Nadin pertly. "What'll she do when oo gets ta my age?"

Flo was still darning.

"Whatever did you do?" asked Dick, strutting in on his sticks. He dropped on the other end of the settee, a yard away, partly facing her. Flo went rosy.

"It wasn't your fault. It's like missis says : if I can't stick on my own feet . . ." She laughed and jabbed the big needle too far. She winced. "See, I can't even darn without hurting myself."

They both laughed.

"She would go an' do it just when hay's down," said Mrs. Nadin, bustling from the pantry. "There's two crocks together of you naa." There was no unkindness; it was simply a brisk comment. And she went on to ask about Dick's people. While he answered Flo recovered. She glanced sideways and noticed anew the dark smoothness of his skin. If only he had not been paralysed, how young and handsome he would have looked !

Mrs. Nadin bustled out again and he asked Flo how many stitches she put each way. As many as were needed, she told him.

"Isn't it monotonous?"

"I'd sooner be out in the field," said Flo.

"I bet you would; so should I."

"Then go; don't let me keep you," said Flo suddenly, teasing.

"Gee, I didn't mean that," he protested. "I meant, if I was you."

"I don't know; I only know what you said," returned Flo. Dick laughed, and then Dot came down the passage.

"You, Mr. Goldbourn! Whatever are you doing?" and from that moment she monopolized him. He got up and stood leaning on his sticks with his back to Flo, and she couldn't help noticing how big and heavy his body was compared with his legs. She was glad when he said he would be going down to the lake.

"And let's hope I shan't get stuck, 'cos to-day Flo can't help me," he said with a quick smile to her.

"Bert and Clem will be in the field if you shout," said Dot coldly.

They watched him get heavily into his chair. Flo felt sad about him, yet when he had stood so close in front of her, heavy and stunted, he had been a bit repulsive. She felt mean about it, but the feeling was there. She brooded on it while she went on darning.

The following day Mr. Nadin announced that the hay was ready for turning; everybody was needed. "Everybody" evidently did not include Mrs. Nadin, for she went on with the housework. The farmer looked at Flo, but Mrs. Nadin promptly intervened: "Oo's non fit yet for muckin' about aw day," and he went out.

"There's some o' the lads' breeches an' jackets ta patch; happen you'll be fit for drivin' th' rake or summat to-morrow," she said to Flo. The foot, though still swelled, was much less tender.

From eleven till seven except for two brief meal-times, Dot and the three men worked in the hay. Dot came in bad-tempered and weary, but Mrs. Nadin told her to shut her trap. "We've heard it every hay-time sin' you were pupped."

Clem got the cows up early and then went back to the field, and Flo managed to milk twelve, more than she had ever done before at one meal-time. The farmer and the boys said it was jolly good. Only Dot showed no appreciation. On the back of Dot's neck a hot patch showed redly where the sun had burned despite the big floppy-brimmed straw with which she had hoped to save herself.

The next day seemed settled, but was grey, unhelpful, and the farmer said the swaths were too heavy to dry without sun.

"There's tomorrer," said Clem. "Sun'll be out agen," and Bert nodded. But the farmer could not leave the hay. "Day after to-morrer'll be weekend, dang it. You'll ha' noo time for farmin'; it'll be all agait runnin' after the lake lazies, an' the hay con goo ta pot."

"Nay, we'll get some o' them ta help," said Bert; but the farmer was dour and said they would shake the hay out and give it the best chance they could. Again he looked at Flo.

"I reckon oo con manage th' kicker, eh?"

So after that Flo found herself mounted on the tedding machine with Colonel lurching in front. From a distance the machine looked something like an old-fashioned triangular-bodied water-cart. This was because of the galvanized casing which enclosed the front, top and sides. The cupped iron seat was above this, and Flo felt as though she were sitting on top of the world. Inside the cover fitted with spikes were two paddles which when the machine was travelling spun backward, throwing up the grass in a most industrious and energetic way. Looking back over the bin-like cover, Flo could see below her the grass pouring over and down like a blue-green wave. Colonel strode indifferently over the patterning swaths; behind they left no pattern, only an even web of loose-lying grasses, weeds and now faded flowers. Flo liked it. She felt gay, riding to and fro looking down on the others who were shaking out with pikels. She and Colonel were doing more than all the rest together; and she seemed to smell the grass turning into hay even as it was whirled up. This was real work; she was accomplishing something. Happening to glance over the willows to the lake she saw Dick Goldbourn sitting patiently with his rod, and all at once she knew why the farmer was so scornful over fishers and boaters and walkers whose only thought was to enjoy themselves although there was so much work to be done. Not that it was really fair to class Dick with the rest, but . . . well Flo felt glad anyway, that she was able to help. She forgot to be too considerate about Colonel and kept him going by a useful slap with the rein ends whenever he began to dawdle. The machine was light and he could manage it, but sweat began to darken the hair under his collar, and he was glad to notice as they were going towards the gate a familiar figure coming in. It was Jack Knight. He called "How do?" and Flo stopped because they were at the hedge, anyway. Jack looked up with his cheery grin.

"You look pleased. Boss of all you survey, eh?"

"I feel I'm doing something," said Flo.

"You've picked the easy job; it's a wonder Clem didna want it."

"It's my foot," said Flo. She didn't mention Dick;

only that she had been running because she was late.

"You might have broken your neck," said Jack. Her foot was on the shaft and unexpectedly he put his hand on her ankle. He had a firm, confident grasp, and after the first impulse to flinch she held still. "Swollen a bit, but non so bad," he commented, matter-of-fact.

She looked on his upstanding hair bleached almost to whiteness. He was not handsome, she decided; but there was a genuineness; nothing that she could explain, simply a feeling that she experienced from him. He still had his hand round her ankle, but then he let go naturally, and asked which she liked best, riding the tedder or driving the roller in spring.

"This," said Flo, quite sure.

"You're wrong," he laughed. "I like rolling; the young grass, it's striving. It's full of vim; it wants to get up. It . . . it's sort of thrillin'. This is dead, finished. It doesna give me the same feelin'."

"But it's food," protested Flo. "It's good. I like it because I feel I'm doing a lot."

"There isna the same promise about it, somehow," he said looking up with his blue eyes serious. "I reckon it's th' same sort o' difference as between doin' an' havin' done. It's the doing that's good. When you've done a thing, it's done with, stale."

"Oh," said Flo. "I never thought like that."

"But we couldna do 'bout hay, of course," he laughed, his mood changing. "Hope it doesna rain, or there'll be a tidy bit spoilt."

"Have you none?" she asked, wishing that she knew more about him; how he really lived. Was it his mother, or who, that had cancer?

"No. I canna afford ta use my land for hay; I havena enough. I crop all I con. I dunna need much hay . . . chiefly for old Mike yonder," and he glanced towards the lane where the piebald horse stood patiently.

"Crop? D'you mean . . .?"

"Food crops; the quickest I con. Spring cabbage, then spinach. Early peas, sprouts . . . that sort o' thing. Two crops a year, if I'm lucky."

"If . . .?"

"If th' weather's owt like. It's non the right country, really, but I'm goin' ta put some glass up, an' heat. Then I'll grow summat." This not boastfully, but in a soberly enthusiastic way to which Flo reacted with increasing interest. He saw that she wanted to know more. "Most chaps says as tomatoes winna grow here, but I reckon it's non bin properly tried. I . . ."

"Hey! What about some work?" came an impatient shout.

Jack, with his mouth open, looked round sharply and saw the farmer waving his pikel. Flo shook the reins briskly and Colonel tossed his head in protest. He lurched rightwards and the tedder began to slew round.

"Hay-fever, eh?" said Jack.

"How d'you mean . . . coughing an' sneezing?"

"No, just hot up an' bothered 'cos he's got so much hay out. Worries hisself stiff,"

"Oh," said Flo, smiling, and slapped the reins again. The paddles began to go round and the hay wave to flow over, and she smelt the warm odour of it again. She thought how nice it must be to be able to try things, to experiment with growing plants, to have a small place of one's own.

Without turning her head, out of the side of her glance, she watched Jack walking towards Mr. Nadin. They talked, Mr. Nadin all the time shredding out little clots of grass, tossing it here and there. After five minutes Jack walked to where an extra pikel was jabbed in the earth. Plucking it up he went back and began to work alongside the farmer. They talked, and at times the talk became so interesting that they both stopped and seemed to argue. Flo wondered what it was about; and then back into her mind came drifting what Jack had said about tedding and rolling. She remembered the thrush and remembrance of his exultant song brought back some of the April morning's freshness. She looked about and contrasted it with the grey stillness of the summer day, and found herself agreeing that it was not quite so good, not quite so good as spring, because, as Jack had said, it lacked the eagerness and promise. She was sure that none of the others would have thought of that. She was glad that Jack had told her. She glanced again, and now he was

walking back to the gate. Calculating that if Jack was going to Moss she might get to the willows and round and be back at the lane as he passed, she slapped the reins along Colonel's undulating back. Colonel lurched a little quicker; the paddles hummed, and the drying grass rustled like falling leaves. And as Jack passed she reached the hedge and called out :

"You're right; I think rolling's better, too."

He grinned understandingly, but shouted back : "Teddin'g's non bad either." He gave his queer salute. "See you some more."

"Yes," said Flo, and after that she kept on till all the swaths were gone and the whole field was spread as with a green-blue web.

Chapter 17

AT dinner Flo learned what the farmer and Jack had been discussing. The farmer mentioned it as soon as he got in.

"What d'you think Jack's latest is? Bin tellin' me how ta mek hay."

"We're doin' it all wrong, I bet," said Clem.

"Wastin' our time, he says. 'You dunna think as we shake it about for fun, done you?' I axed 'im. 'Dry it without shakin' it so much,' 'e says. 'How con you?' I said. 'If weather's good, turn it once in th' swath an' then get it in,' says 'e. 'The quicker the better.'"

Mr. Nadin looked at his sons and then at his wife and daughter and Flo in turn.

"His father were daft an' 'e teks after 'im," said Mrs. Nadin promptly, as if there was nothing else to be said.

"What's his argument? He had one no doubt . . . out of a book." Bert popped in a chestnut-sized pickled onion, graunched it twice, and went on graunching and talking at the same time. "He's a beggar for books."

"Some as 'as no sense tries ta get it that way," said Mrs. Nadin.

"He says as there's a sort o' varnish on th' stalks. When they're shook up it cracks an' then th' stuff's spoiled," the farmer explained rather laboriously. "Ay, he said as 'e'd read it somewheer."

Flo got the impression that Mr. Nadin was really worried; obviously he was stubborn, determined to keep to his own methods, yet he had been impressed and had spoken hoping that one of the boys might know more about it. "I dunna see 'ow you *can* dry it properly 'bout shakin' it out," he finished, almost as if trying to convince himself.

"Oh, he's allus gettin' ideas," said Clem.

"Trouble is, he doesna follow 'em out; allus on ta something fresh," said Bert, reaching his glass and taking a deep drink.

"I know it loses seeds if it's non cut just reet; if 'e'd argued about that I could 'a understood," complained Mr. Nadin.

"Hech," broke in Mrs. Nadin testily, "it's hay outside an' hay in; let's have a change."

Nobody seemed to be able to think of anything else and the meal ended in silence.

In the afternoon Flo was shown how to draw the hay into wind-rows. The rake had a foot-lever and a hand-lever to be used together, only she was forced to do all by hand. There was a good crop, and she was kept at it reaching down and pulling on the handle. The long curved tines swung up, clearing themselves, then clashed down and groped again along the ground. It was harder for Colonel, too, and Flo could not control him well with one hand, so that the wind-rows suggested tremendous caterpillars with convulsions. She was ashamed of them. At half-past five Mr. Nadin stopped her. It was cow-time. She was glad of the rest because her ankle was aching again. The farmer and Dot milked as well, but the boys kept on in the field. Getting at the end of a wind-row they tucked their pikels in and shoved, tobogganning the hay along till the weight stopped them, and then making it up into neat conical lumps. Mr. Nadin kept going to the gate. Once Flo heard him shout:

"Na, Bert, mek it proper; they'll non shed water."

What reply he got she did not know, but he came back muttering. Dot was in a bad temper also, and Flo began to understand why haytime was so disliked. The farmer and the boys worked till ten, and when Flo looked out of her window the field was covered with humps which in the dusk looked as if some gigantic moles had thrown up their hills all

over. She remembered the swaths of the morning, and was surprised when she counted the times in the day that the look of the field had been completely changed.

At ten next morning the weather broke. A fine drizzle like a cloud came up the valley from the west.

"Fine-weather rain," said Clem. He went off in the float with Colonel to get a new shoe, one having been kicked off during the raking, though Flo hadn't noticed.

Bert got his gun. Mr. Nadin went with him, but only to the gate, where he looked over the field which in the greyness looked disconsolate. He stayed there ten minutes. Hearing Flo going to the wash-house he turned and said, "Damn good job we got it coiled," and at once turned to stare over the gate again. Half an hour later Flo saw him with a spade and a mattock going to open a drain that had choked in Three Oaks. He could not go far away from the hay field.

In the afternoon Flo was surprised to hear Mrs. Nadin say, "If you want to goo out, goo. When th' weather's fit agen the old fool'll be like a slave-driver."

Although Flo's foot had gone easier in the night, she decided to write home; but then thought that if she didn't go out Mrs. Nadin might give her more darning, which had already thoroughly bored her. So knowing that she could not walk far she put her old coat on over her working frock, intending to idle round the lake. She went slowly along the lane. Just as she was level with the boat-house Bert came out. He seemed surprised and called, "Hello, where are you off?"

She told him, "Nowhere special," and he answered, "I promised you a trip; now's your chance."

He selected two oars and carried them under his arm into the boat-house. There was a skiff alongside, and he told her to step in. He gave a powerful shove from the stage and they forged backward from under the pointed roof. Skilfully and easily he manœuvred round and rowed with leisurely rhythm. Flo felt in the bottom of a hollow as she looked up at the great grey-green farmhouse, so unfamiliar from there. The drizzle flowed down on them, and beyond the immediate shores everywhere looked grey and soaked. Beside the willows Bert balanced the oars in the rowlocks and let the boat drift and there was silence. Fine as the rain was, Flo

fancied that she heard the faintest sizzling as it met the placid surface. Bert saw to the spinners on his rods, then whipped them in a circle over his head and let them drop lightly astern one after the other. He told Flo how to hold the rods, and she was to report the least suggestion of a snatch. He began to row again, and she felt the slight vibration of the lines and was thrilled, expecting every moment to hook something about as big as a whale. Only nothing happened. They came to the first arm and went slowly across. Flo was excited to see a slim grey bird about a yard high leap off the mud at the far end and go in a swirl to the top of the willows. Its wings looked black and tremendous. Above the bushes the bird flapped slowly and seemed to fly with great ease.

"Wish I had a gun for the blighter," said Bert. "Pike an' them, they're ruinin' the place."

Down the arm there were numbers of wild ducks, also, and six towered at the same moment as the heron, though not as high. They made a quick-winged circuit of the lake, and dropped back into the arm when the boat was past. Flo looked to the rods again, but still no fish was tempted.

"Are there any?" she asked.

"Plenty . . . but non always hungry," Bert answered.

She watched him. He pulled easily, confidently. The hairy tweed of his jacket had been turned from rust-brown to grey by drizzle specks. Flo was getting damper and damper, but there was a pleasant clean feel with the rain; it seemed to cleanse her cheeks and she imagined herself looking pink and attractive. Bert smiled, but she knew intuitively that it was only because he was content. She wished that Jack Knight or Dick Goldbourn had been in the boat instead.

They had reached the far end and Bert turned and drove parallel with the rough-stone-faced dam which sloped away from them. Its level top of grass cut them off from everything beyond, as though the world in that direction ended there. They were in the widest part of the lake, near where Jenny and Jerry had swum. Midway Bert stopped, oar-blades moveless in the water. The little clap-clap of wavelets beneath the prow ended, silence was complete again. He looked up the water musingly, without speaking. Flo copied him. She had never realized that the lake was so big. It

stretched away like a sea, and the dim flat height of Moss Top in the drizzle seemed miles off. The flat shores grown with willows on the north and with alders and bush hawthorns on the south reminded her of a page of a story she had read in a book left in the front room by one of the previous week-end visitors. It was called "Heart of Darkness," and described a low-lying African coast backed by mysterious bush. "It's just like that," Flo thought.

"It's a good spot," said Bert, starting pulling again.

The south shore lacked the long arms of the north and was not as interesting, and Flo began to feel the wet going cold down her neck. She tried to mop it with her handkerchief, and Bert grinned and asked what was up. She was about to reply when he abruptly let go of his right oar to grab the rod on that side which she had neglected. He gave a quick wrist snatch, getting up swiftly with expert balance. Flo saw the line cut the water, first away from them, then left, then right. How queer, when she could not see anything; as if it was the line that had suddenly come alive and gone mad. Her pulse speeded up; she gripped the sides of the skiff, till the line all at once went dead again. "Small one," Bert announced. He began to wind in, holding the rod tip close along the surface. "Get the net."

She fumbled, the handle seemed too long. She gripped it halfway in her right hand, and stared intently overside. Slowly the vague dark shape of the fish came upward. She leaned over, dipping with a splash. As if electrified the fish leapt, smashing the water, so that momentarily she saw it complete—curved, lean, silvery blue and vicious. She almost sprawled overboard, her heart bolting.

"What the . . . the b's gone!" exclaimed Bert, and went on more amused than angry, "You dipped as if you was after an alligator."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" murmured Flo, feeling foolish, yet half glad. "I wasn't expecting it to . . ."

"You damn near jumped in yourself, didn't you?" Bert grinned. He wound the rest of the line. "I generally go round once a day," he explained. "Sometimes you can see off the water what you canna see on land." He rowed on with the one line out. "I'll be damn glad when th'ays in."

The old man got worked up about what Jack said, eh?"

"Yes," said Flo, looking across to where a few of the hay cocks could be seen behind the bay in the willows. "Will it spoil badly?"

"I reckon what Jack said was right, you know," Bert observed slowly. "I've read a bit, somewhere. The more you mess it about, th' more likely you are ta spoil it. Jack's non as daft as some thinks; he's got his head fast. He reads. It's surprisin' what you can get out o' books."

"D'you read?"

"Me? I've noo time. By gum, speak of the devil . . .!"

Flo glanced in the way of his nod. Coming down the lane past the farm was Jack in his float. Opposite the boathouse he stopped the nag and strolled down. Bert looked over his right shoulder and with deft short strokes glided faultlessly in beside the stage and dropped the painter over its peg.

"Lucky beggars," said Jack, standing over them while Bert wound in the remaining line. "What luck?"

"Nowt. She gave the on'y one we saw a clout wi' th'net as scared it a mile off."

"What you doin' . . . joy-ridin'?" asked Jack, looking at Flo.

"It's my afternoon off," said Flo, Bert's hard palm closing on her hand to pull her up on the stage. "I can't walk 'cos of my foot, so he said he'd take me."

"Ever bin up ta Belle View? I'll give you a ride there, if you like."

"What you after there?" Bert asked.

"Greenhouse. He's givin' up, so I heard at auction. Have you heard owt?"

"Ay, he's givin' up all right. What the hell d'you want another house for?"

"Tomatoes. If you're goin' for a job, you've got to go in prop'ly. If you get customers, you've got ta be able ta keep 'em supplied."

"I'd sooner shoot," said Bert drily.

"Comin'?" asked Jack of Flo. They had moved into the open and for a moment his pale blue eyes met her's. "It's non Pullman-strung, but it'll save your foot."

She did not speak, but went with him. The piebald nag

turned its head, its baggy blinkers queerly making it seem like an old long-headed man staring interrogatively over old-fashioned spectacles.

"When are you goin' ta shove it in a museum?" asked Bert.

"What . . . old Mike?" Jack laughed good-temperedly. "You coming, too, He'll pull three."

"Nay, it's nowt in my line . . . chaperonin'." Bert winked at Flo and took the path past the cabin to the house.

"I like Bert; he's the best," Jack commented as they went up the slope. He pulled down a small wooden flap on the right-hand side of the float.

"But it's the driver's, isn't it?" Flo objected. He told her that Mike didn't need driving; and he sat on the opposite side, balanced partly on the mudguard.

After three encouraging shouts the piebald shook himself into a jog-trot which took them on very little quicker than walking. However, Jack seemed satisfied and began to talk of the folk round about being nearly all like Bert and Clem.

"Decent chaps, but no go in them. As long as they've got what they want, they dunna care. Don't know what ambition is."

"No," said Flo, watching the slow *revolving* of hedges, trees and fields past them on either side. She had become almost unconscious of the rain, which had gone finer still, almost to mist. Moss Edge was smothered by a blur of white cloud and she wondered if they would climb into it.

"I reckon we're all here ta do something; non just to drift through anyway, enjoyin' ourselves," Jack went on.

"Yes," said Flo, beginning to pay more attention.

"They make fun o' me, always tryin' things."

"D'you think you can grow tomatoes?" Flo asked, looking without his knowing, so far as she could tell. The collar of his old navy blue reefer stood up with the pink rims of his ears just showing, but his head was bare, and the crisp hair glistened silver with drizzle bubbles. His lean nose and lips suggested determination, and she was suddenly struck by the complete difference from the rectangular rather dark features of Dick Goldbourn.

"I reckon I can," said Jack. "You dunna know what you con do 'bout tryin'."

They passed under a high-arched bridge which Flo guessed she must have travelled over when she came from Barrow. The road swung a little rightward and went down an avenue of larches ending in a triangular space on which looked dourly more in the manner of a police station a solid stone-built pub with the curious name of Ants' Nest. A few other houses were scattered about, but almost as though hiding.

"Mossdyché," said Jack, and guided Mike round the end of the pub where Flo saw a narrower lane which took them curving to a shallow gurgling stream. By the bridge where the stream ran unfenced for a dozen yards three cows were drinking with a girl of eight or nine standing by. She had fresh cheeks, sun-gold hair, and an innocent look. Jack shouted: "Hi, you're lettin' 'em drink too much; you'll have 'em bustin'. How's Dick?"

"All right, thank you," answered the child primly, smiling up.

"There's not many people you don't know," said Flo.

"And not many as don't know me," he said, as if he liked it.

They turned off leftward up a still narrower lane, as rough and twisted as a torrent bed. Mike stepped as though he had corns, and Jack did not try to hurry him. They came to the lowest whiffs of cloud flowing between the hollies and hawthorns with which the track was hedged; great white smudges that looked as though they would overwhelm Mike, the float and everything, but which passed with eerie silence and scarcely any perceptible thickening of the atmosphere; whiteness almost without body. Flo liked it. Between drifts she made out under the hill on the right a tall newish house which seemed out of place by the old sunk lane. Jack turned in between squared stone pillars. "Belle View", Flo read, and smiled for there was no view, though it was easy to imagine the lake far below. They approached the house from the end. The gravel drive spread into an oval front and then past the house were sloping gardens with two shabby greenhouses at the side. House and garden were neat, but only perfunctorily so; there was no real sign of pride. Flo stayed in the float while Jack went round the back. After a while he walked up to the greenhouses with a medium-sized man with a very small head in a small cap and small feet in thin shoes,

but with a stomach like a barrel. The pair chatted and went from house to house and chatted some more, inside and outside. The stout man made as if to walk away, then turned back. Jack went round the outside of both houses very carefully. He tested many of the panes with spread fingers; and much of the wood with a pocket-knife. The stout man took his cap off and scratched the top of his cranium which was bald and unexpectedly pale, as if it had never been uncovered for a year or more. Jack put both hands in his pockets and with his coat spread out looked nearly as fat as his opponent. The stout man spat on to a cabbage top. They went back into the lower house. When they came out the stout man very deliberately shut the door and led to the upper house. Ten minutes more were spent there before they came strolling towards the float. The stout man nodded at Flo, said it was a wet day, hoisted and spat, told Jack to be good, and then waddled off round the house back. Jack grinned and said: "Got 'em," and started Mike round.

Jack was so obviously pleased that Flo felt glad, too.

"You brought me luck," he said; and she thought of the green pig and the heart-stone and wondered whether he believed in that sort of thing. Instinctively she knew that the answer was "No."

"Forty-seven quid the two. I'll grow some tomatoes now, by gee, you wait." He chuckled. "Ben didn't want ta part, but it's the road; folk winna come up for 'em." And as they went down, Mike stepping even more warily, Flo learned that Jack had already got a stove and pipes enough, he reckoned, for these two houses as well as the house he had already bought.

"Ben's like th'rest. He says I conna grow 'em, neither. They say it's too cold, an' there's non enough sun; an' they say th' soil's not right."

"I . . . I thought any soil was all right," said Flo.

"Well, most soil'll grow somethin', but there's some as is a lot better. And some soil'll grow one thing, an' another soil'll grow somethin' else. But thing as gets me is th' way chaps round here just thinks as their ground winna grow anythin' on'y grass, an' yet they never tried it."

"Is Mr. Nadin as bad?"

"No, he's good . . . in his way. But he's chiefly keen on cattle, and he's old-fashioned. He never reads, and a man as doesn't can't keep up-to-date . . . unless, of course, he goes to special lectures an' demonstrations. But he doesn't."

"Do you?" asked Flo.

"I never get chance. But I study up when I con, an' I reckon I'll be able ta grow tomatoes an' lettuce an' chrysanthemums an', happen, a few other things."

Flo laughed. "You're always thinking about tomatoes. D'you dream about them?"

"I dunna," said Jack, laughing also. "I'm too busy; when I go ta bed I sleep."

"Suppose the soil round here's good for something else, an' not for tomatoes?"

"I think it will. But if it winna, I'll get some, or make some as will. I'll shovel up a few thousand mole-heaps an' fetch a few hundred sacks o' leaf-mould from th' beech woods yonder." They had come out from beneath the railway bridge again, and he waved to the top of the hill behind them. "It's grand stuff for potting," he went on, his pale eyes looking at her gravely. "You know, I'm non so set on tomatoes that I winna try anythin' else. But I think there'd be a good sale for fresh tomatoes round here, an' I'd like to sell 'em ta folk so that they'd know what real fresh home-grown ones are like."

"You'd sooner grow things than be like Mr. Nadin?" said Flo, studying him and wondering what would happen to him eventually.

"I like animals, in a way; but I'd sooner grow things. I dunna know why," he confessed. "There's somethin' in the touch of the soil, somehow, as makes me . . . specially in spring when it comes warm after bein' clammy . . . Have you ever dug your hands in a mole-heap then?"

"I haven't."

"Next spring, just try it. It's dry an' warm, it's like corn meal, it's . . . well, somehow there's something wonderful about it. Nobody knows exactly what's in soil, an' what it'll do an' what it winna do. I . . . I let it run through me fingers, an' I wonder about it. If anybody saw me doin' it, they'd think me daft."

"I wouldn't," said Flo gently.

"Trouble is, most folk think they know everythin', specially 'bout things like soil as there's plenty of; an' the rest don't care, anyway."

They had reached the straight that ran nearest to the lake. Through blackthorn and hawthorn bushes Flo saw Dick Goldbourn sitting patiently with his rod over the water.

"D'you think Dick Goldbourn cares?" she asked.

Jack looked, too, but did not answer at once. Then he said: "Dick's had a hard time. He's a decent chap; I like Dick."

"But does he care about things as you think he ought to?" Flo persisted, not really knowing why.

"Nay," Jack laughed, his mood and tone changing, "you're non goin' ta catch me that way. Live an' let live. I dunna think I could fish all day, but I'm no good at fishin'. You should 'a seen me t'other day trying ta help him land a pike; it welly drowned me."

"I nearly drowned myself trying to land that one of Bert's to-day before you came," confessed Flo. Both of them laughed.

Flo wondered if Dick had seen her; but she did not care either way.

Chapter 18

THE smirry weather continued. Week-end came, and Bert as usual was out all the time with fishermen. Dot and Flo wore coats over their heads as they took the trays of things to the cabin. Mr. Nadin was more bitter than ever against the visitors, calling them "blister-shirkers" and "shinonakin' wasters".

"Shut your trap an' goo an' tek a dose o' salts," ordered Mrs. Nadin tartly. "We're hay-makin' as noo weather stops. Shift thisen from under mi feet."

Each day Flo felt more sorry for the farmer. After the drizzle came a period of showers, with occasional sun breaks, but never enough to dry the fields; not enough even to suggest that the hay might be shaken out. The high cocks lost their scented greeny-blueness and went a dull buff, sinking

into sodden lumps without shape or pride. But the rain made the grass grow tall and succulent round them, as if it would hide their dismalness. The farmer with his blunt-toed boot lifted the edge of a lump and Flo saw the grass under it white, lemon and yellow and squiggly, eager to grow straight but unable to.

"We'll be ruined," said the farmer, "'bout hay, winter feed'll cost a fortune." It would have been better if Lake Meadow had never been cut, he said; all their work had been wasted. In the other fields, Charlie Meadow and Square Piece, twenty-four acres in all, the grass was still untouched. It had lost its seed and gone dark and dishevelled, but it was still cuttable and wasn't rotting. "If this weather keeps on we'll be hay-makin' at Christmas."

The boys didn't worry. It was only Mr. Nadin. Bert said: "It's worse August I remember, an' that's saying' something. If it doesna take up the old mon'll go hairless."

Mrs. Nadin wasted no sympathy on the farmer, either. "Tickle thiself, you look worse than th'weather," she told him. "Sun winna shine 'cos you goo all broody."

"Farm con go ta hell for all you care!"

"Are you tekkin' me ta Bakewell Show?" she demanded back. "If you conna work you con play."

It seemed as though he would not reply, but after a pause he said, "Ay," and then went out.

"Biggest show as there is i' these parts," Mrs. Nadin explained to Flo.

August holiday week Thursday arrived with the sky still low and blotched black and grey. Mr. Nadin came down in his best whipcord suit.

"What the heck, milkin' i' that!" stormed Mrs. Nadin, up a little earlier than usual.

"I thought you wanted ta go ta Bakewell," said Mr. Nadin mildly.

"Too lazy ta change agen; by Dickie, it's a wonder you dunna come down in your shirt tails an' save dressin' at all."

The farmer went out and the morning work was gone through. At breakfast the farmer was a little more morose even than he had been. Mrs. Nadin chipped him about being as cheeferful as a bankrupt undertaker to go with.

"If the weather doesna take up we'll be bankrupt soon all reet," said the farmer.

Mrs. Nadin was to be ready at ten, when Clem would be back with the float. Bert was going to the show also, but with some of his pals from Moss, and he went off at once after breakfast. As she washed up Flo thought what a quiet day it was going to be. She had learned that it was the one day when they put on the cabin, "No Meals", and on the boat-house, "No Boats", and Flo had heard Dot say that she was going out, too. It seemed quiet already, Flo thought, and she wondered if Mr. Nadin would give her any jobs to do about the farm. Would she be expected to begin evening milking alone?

"What did you do wi' 'is collar as I told you ta put ta air?" Mrs. Nadin interrupted.

"Put it on the oven top," said Flo, glancing round.

Mrs. Nadin looked into the oven but it wasn't there either. She was in carpet slippers and a white silk blouse, with only her cream flannel petticoat on, extremely short when one was used to her in long black overskirts, but she strutted quickly down the path and yelled, "Emmott! Emmott! . . . Wheer are ta?"

There was only the echo from the buildings, and the little woman went energetically across the yard and in through the barn wicket. She reappeared unexpectedly quickly from the shippon and peered into the stable. Walking purposefully back to the barn, she ducked in again and came back this time through the field gate from the midden.

"You havena seen the old fat-yead?" she demanded of Flo as she got back. Scarcely waiting to hear she went on up the passage, up the stairs, to the bedroom, bathroom, lavatory.

"His coat's gone," Dot announced, after looking over the hooks.

"And 'is tie an' studs, the old b——r," said Mrs. Nadin. "If 'e's slipped me I'll slip 'im."

"I expect he's gone with the lot from the Bull; I heard there was a chara," said Dot.

"Huh, thinks 'e's got the better of me! Thinks because 'e's gone I conna get. By God, I'll get there if I crawl!"

She bustled out of the kitchen and upstairs again, and they

heard her stumping about. Flo would have liked to have made excited comments, but Dot had taken on her most frigid manner and told her to get on with what she was doing. Quick steps came down.

"Here you," at Flo, "goo an' get ready. If he con goo off ta enjoy 'isself, we'll all goo an' let th' place goo ta pot."

"You're not going there to make a scene with everybody . . ." protested Dot.

"Shut your teeth or you'll bite yourself!" snapped her mother. "Are you comin' or not?"

"No," said Dot coldly. "I've promised to go to Jean's."

"Go, an' be damned then; I'll make 'im pay," said Mrs. Nadin, taking no further notice of her. "You, get gone, an' be-down in five minutes," she shot at Flo.

Flo felt trembly. She did not know whether she was doing right or not in getting ready, only there did not seem to be any other way open. She had not washed, but she dare not go down. She did her hair quicker than she had ever done it. When she got back to the kitchen Mrs. Nadin stood ready in her long black silk smock-like coat, her black straw hat with its nodding yellow flower, and her umbrella. Dot stood by disapprovingly.

"You're not takin' her to see what scene you make?"

"I'll mek no scene; it'll be 'im, if there is a scene," said her mother quickly and grimly. "Has Bert gone off scrim-shankin' an' all? Come on, you, we'll walk ta th' level."

"I don't think . . ." Dot started.

"I know you dunna. You're yead's too addled!" retorted Mrs. Nadin, making to the door. Flo, unwilling and unhappy, walked a pace behind, as though she were being dragged. Mrs. Nadin went with short snappy steps, ignoring her. Her speed was considerable, and she kept at it up the hill. On the main road she went left past the toll-house to the Kicking Donkey just below. She paraded up the short sanded passage to the bar, which was dark and low. On crossed legs leaning against one of two red-rimmed barrels on a low bench at the back was a lanky man in shirt sleeves smoking contemplatively.

"Shake thisen an' get th' taxi!" ordered Mrs. Nadin without preliminary. "That sneakin' b——r of mine's gone off an' I'm after 'im."

"Eh, I thought you'd come for a drink, an' we're non open. I were just goin' ta brush out," drawled the lanky man.

"If you dunna get us ta th' station i' five minutes you'll feel this 'ere," said Mrs. Nadin, lifting her umbrella.

"Eh, I tell you I'm workin'."

"An' I'm talkin' an' meanin' it," she retorted. "Come on, or I'll get it myself. That old devil's non gettin' the better o' me."

"Bakewell, eh? Good old Emmott!" chuckled the lanky one, lifting the bar flap.

"I'll good old Emmott you!" threatened Mrs. Nadin, almost treading on his heels.

He called in at the side door which faced the lower buildings, telling some unseen person to shut the front door, and two minutes later out of a barn-like place a big taxi purred. Mrs. Nadin bundled in and Flo after her.

"It's th' eleven-thirty, eh?" the driver asked, looking sideways through the slide in the glass partition.

"Ay. Emmott'll settle with you. 'E's gooin' ta run up a few bills today as 'e's non expectin'."

The lanky driver guffawed and drove fast. The train was coming up the platform when they got through the ticket office. There was a score of people and the train was nearly full. Fortunately three railway-men, going off duty, got out, and Mrs. Nadin promptly took the opening. Flo was followed by two young men. There was a general shuffling and room was made for all, though one of the young men had to sit pinched forward directly facing Mrs. Nadin. She studied him, but he looked away through the window. His hands spread on his knees for balance were big and very pink, as if they had recently been boiled.

"Who are you?" demanded Mrs. Nadin loudly all at once, making every head turn.

"M . . . me?" stuttered the young man, forced to look and going red.

"Yes, you! I'm non cross-eyed, am I?" asked the fierce little woman. "You're Sam Winkle's lad, arena you?"

"Ay," he admitted.

"I thought you were. What is it you're called—Archibald, or summat daft like that, isna it?"

The young man nodded helplessly.

"Huh, I'd never 'a saddled a lad o' mine wi' a name like that," she commented, and went on briskly with a continuous, disparaging catechism.

The young man seemed to sweat. Flo fancied she could smell the grease on his hair. She felt sorry for him, and ashamed of her companion. Others in the carriage, especially the young man's mate, appeared to be enjoying it. The questions brought out that the young man was seventeen, nearly eighteen, and was working on a farm for his father's eldest brother, Amos. He got twelve shillings a week and his keep. He was courting, and the girl's name was Emily Lunt, but "non her as was born in th' workhouse". He hadn't enough money to get married yet, but he hoped to have enough when he was twenty-one.

"Amos. That was him as was fined for pinchin' a pig, wasna it?" asked Mrs. Nadin.

"Non as I know of," said the young man desperately.

"You seem a sensible enough young chap," was Mrs. Nadin's loud summing up as the train slowed into Miller's Dale. "Here's a bit of advice. If you keep it you'll do more than I've known any other young chap do. Keep your mouth shut an' your bowels open, an' you con shake your fist at the devil!"

There was a titter and everybody stopped in their places for her to get first to the door. In the Bakewell train, where again they only just got seats, she was unexpectedly quiet. She stared out of the window with her own thoughts. Flo had not spoken all the journey, but she dared to ask how they were going to find Mr. Nadin.

"Find 'im? I'll find 'im," said Mrs. Nadin, and shut up again.

Then they were in the crowd going along a level road. Flo looked at the treed hills, which were more rounded and greener than those of Mossdyche. And she looked at the people and felt that she might enjoy herself. Several persons called to Mrs. Nadin, "Good day, Monica," and asked where Emmott was.

"He's gotten there afore me," she answered, non-committal, and Flo sensed that even her attitude was changing. She was

being affected by the holiday mood all round. Part of her anger had been due to fear of not being able to get to the show; now that she had arrived she was preparing to have a good time. They went in through restless turnstiles, and Flo stared at the expanse and the number of 'marquees and tents. She had been to a one-day show before, but never to one like this.

"However shall we find him?" she repeated.

"That'll be noo trouble," said Mrs. Nadin. "'E'll non be at th' boosing tents yet; 'e'll be among th' cattle."

She bought a programme to find where the cattle were, and they walked slowly through the crowd. The ground was soft and seemed likely to be badly churned up before the day's end, but there was no rain. The band of the Gordon Highlanders playing marches and the good temper of nearly everybody made even the greyness seem cheerful. Mrs. Nadin said it wasn't likely that "the old devil" would be crushing by the ring; most probably he'd be mooching round the pens arguing with "some of t'other Moss riff-raff". Here the crowd was not nearly as mixed as at the main ring, or round the flower and poultry marquees which they had passed. There were very few women, and plainly the men were practically all farmers or farm-men. Flo gazed round for Mr. Nadin in his bowler hat above the rest. She wondered whatever would happen when they did find him. Then almost at once her attention was taken by a throaty challenge, not very loud, yet somehow as threatening as a roar. She glanced apprehensively towards where it came from and saw a massive red bull. Its feet were smothered in wheat straw and it seemed all body, its back as level and broad as an old-time mahogany dresser. It stretched its neck, tilting its thick muzzle, and bawled again. Its horns were thicker than Flo's wrists and looked as strong as iron. She had only a glimpse before two farmers moved together in front of the red and blue cards hanging on the pen front, but she craned back in the hope of getting another look at the beast. Instead she found herself staring straight at Jack Knight, just behind.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

"Seen that tripe-yeard o' mine?" demanded Mrs. Nadin, ignoring his greeting.

"Emmott? Ay, he were with Bill Willox over by th' best dairy cow," Jack answered, indicating with a slanting of his head. "Want tekkin' to 'im?"

"Ay," said Mrs. Nadin. "He's best copped while he's sober."

Jack grinned but went ahead, with Mrs. Nadin following and Flo last. They pushed through narrow alleys between pens, they went up rows and down rows. To Flo it began to seem hopeless, and then there he was bolt straight with heavily wrinkled brow staring down his nose into a catalogue held nearly on a level with his chin, as if it was the most involved document he had ever studied. Mrs. Nadin made almost a bound. At the last moment, without change of attitude, he swivelled his eyes down on her in a most comical way.

"You!" he ejaculated, but with much less surprise than Flo had expected. "How the heck did you get?"

"Slid on mi backside down th' telephone wires," retorted Mrs. Nadin, swiping the catalogue from under his chin with her umbrella. "You old sod, thought you'd get away, didna you? I'm non so green-cheesy as I look. I'm havin' a day as well as thee, an' you're payin'!"

A few curious persons were watching, but Mr. Nadin shrugged and said "Oh."

"Ay, an' first thing, claw out five bob for 'er," nodding at Flo.

His hand went under the point of his jacket into the cross-pocket of his trousers.

"An' a quid for yoursel' an' we'll part," he suggested.

"Non likely," said Mrs. Nadin. "Naa I've got you I stick. If you goo gallivantin', I goo. Where'll oo meet us?"

The farmer looked musingly on the two half-crowns on his palm. "How'd you get," he asked, "by train? Chara I come in were full; there'd be noo room for . . ."

"Then there'll be noo bother, we'll all goo back by train," said Mrs. Nadin promptly. "Five-thirty. Oo con meet us at th' main gate at five." She picked the half-crowns up and thrust them at Flo. "You'll non want ta be cluckin' round two old fowls like us all day; mek th' best on it. An' dunna forget ta be at th' main gate."

Flo started to thank her, but she turned away without listening, making towards the nearest dinner-tent, and the farmer, after a slow droop of his right eyelid, followed.

"Where you goin'?" Flo heard Jack Knight ask from behind. He had not spoken since their meeting with Mr. Nadin, and she had momentarily forgotten him. "If you dunna know your way about, come wi' me," he invited. "Rum cup o' tea, them two, eh? She'll stick to 'im like a shadow all day. When they're at home she's boss all right; but when he's out of her sight she's like a cow without its calf."

"She made me come with her . . . just so he'd have to pay," said Flo, laughing uneasily. "Won't I be a nuisance?"

"Come on," he said abruptly, ignoring her question. "There's a lot o' things I want ta see, but you say what you want an' we'll work 'em in best as we can."

He went sturdily just a little ahead of her.

"There's nothing I know of. It . . . it's all new to me," said Flo. "Anything's all right . . ."

"You'll want ta see the flowers, anyway. I should think best time's now, before the afternoon crowd."

He went on without hesitation as if he knew the showground as well as Moss or Mossdyche valley. As they stood aside a moment at the marquee opening for a convoy of people to pass out he told her that they couldn't see everything, but he'd show her what was what. He'd been round already, first thing. Flo was content. His quiet, partly husky voice took hold of her. He walked with quick short steps, slipping through the crowd in a curious lithe way, so that she had difficulty in keeping up. Sometimes half a dozen persons separated them, but his light uncovered upstanding hair was a good guide, and whenever he got ahead he waited patiently. Their first stop was at a big stall set out with carnations in tiers. Flo exclaimed at the many different colours, the frilling, the velvety sheen of the darker blooms. Jack pointed to a very dark wine, but she didn't like that as much as a beautiful salmon pink with an orange glow in its depths. He took a tattered red-backed notebook out of his side pocket and pencilled the name down.

"All right, I'll try 'em both," he said.

"Where?" asked Flo.

"In one of the greenhouses," he answered, matter of fact. "It won't be tomatoes all the time," and he smiled, his blue eyes meeting her's intimately so that for a moment it seemed to her that there was no one else in the marquee. "How about roses next?" he suggested after the shortest pause.

Then he was showing her the table decorations. She chose the table with flesh pink sweet-peas and long emerald ropes of smilax.

"Get away," he said, "that's all love and honey. That kind of thing's bin seen since the year dot," and he took her to a table done all with catmint, rose-pink, blue and mauve, with a few old-fashioned clove pinks for contrast. "Don't say you like it if you don't."

"It's . . . it's very nice."

"But you'd rather have the other?"

"It . . . it's cold, somehow."

"But it's new," he laughed. "It got first, anyway."

Next without saying where they were going he led her into a second large marquee set out with scores of card tables covered with paper cloths designed to imitate Belfast damask.

"Half a crown a time," he explained briefly. "It's a tiring job, show-lookin'. No sense in doing without. An' if we leave it later we'll never get in."

As it was they had a job to find a table to themselves. There was no choice of food, the same for everybody—sliced ham and tongue and green salad with hot new potatoes and pats of butter. Flo had never had this mixture before, but found it good and filling. After that came Victorian plums and custard, and finally coffee and cheese. Jack talked nearly all the time . . . about carnations, about roses.

"If I grow owt I want ta grow it good," he said thoughtfully.

Then he switched to noticing the people; trying to guess what they all were.

"It's just a day out for most of 'em. They don't know a ewe from a goat, but they enjoy themselves."

Flo was aware that she was enjoying herself also. Jack's slow, but nearly continuous, talk left her completely at ease. And yet it was interesting talk. She realized that he was really thinking aloud; she was seeing the show and the people not

only herself but through his eyes as well. And he knew so much more about country things and country folk that she was content to listen and learn.

"I'd like ta bet that he's from Ashbourne way," nodding to a spare man in stained whipcord breeches and noticeable new black leggings. "Sheep man . . . used ta working with his hands in his cross-pockets an' a stick under his arm. Dogs do th' work on a sheep farm."

Jack was known to many of the people who kept coming in and mooching round for tables. It was always, "Hello, Jack, how's things?" Never his surname. He answered them all the same with ready ease.

"Won't they wonder who I am?" Flo asked, self-conscious.

"Oh, I'm usually with someone fresh . . . it won't worry 'em," he answered lightly, and she was sorry that she had spoken.

He ate slowly and took ten minutes to sip his coffee. But at last he was ready. "How'd it be," he said, "if we go where I want, to the greenhouses an' the pamphlets, an' then we'll see what time there is . . .?" She agreed; she was willing to go anywhere. The greenhouses turned out to be empty, just shells for sale, and he poked about to see how everything worked and made notes and asked questions, but in such a companionable way that the salesman answered willingly for twenty minutes, although he must have known for more than half the time that Jack was no purchaser. And next the "pamphlets", Flo found, were Ministry of Agriculture bulletins and leaflets displayed on a stall which reminded her of a railway inquiry bureau where one went about holidays. There were two young men to answer everything. They wore plus-fours and red-white-and-green college ties. One was superior and the other too affable. Jack opened books and studied pamphlets with the affable one always after him trying to tell him something which apparently he didn't want to know. Jack simply kept quiet and read what he wanted, till at last he got left in peace. Hardly anybody else came to the stall, and Flo got rather tired of it because there were not many folk in the vicinity either. The day was still grey, but there was no sign of it going any worse, and it was mild, so she listened to the band from the distance and wondered what Mr. and Mrs. Nadin were doing.

"Four and six, please," she woke up to hear the affable college boy saying. "You'll grow something if you follow out all that those say."

Flo was surprised at the bundle. Jack looked pleased and seemed to have no idea that she might have been bored.

"Doesn't that show," he said glancing back; "hardly anybody there, an' yet there it all is, damn near for nothin'."

"All what?"

"All the latest about everything. The government an' the universities spend I dunno how much experimentin' an' findin' out. An' they put it all out cheap so's anybody can have it, an' nobody cares. Old man Nadin there muckin' his hay about; thinks I'm daft tryin' to tell him. But it's all there."

"He wouldn't like being talked at like that young man talked at you," said Flo thoughtfully.

"I know he wouldna. They're th'wrong type for some folk. I dunna mind; I just let 'em talk. But trouble is some folk winna learn from anybody. I got some fine stuff here on startin' a hot-house . . . just what I want. If I'd got a book from a shop it 'ud cost quids."

Enthusiastically he held the bundle of papers and bulletins out in front of her for a moment, and she felt ashamed of having been bored.

"All the knowledge there is, damn near, about farmin' an' growin', there for pickin' up," he exclaimed. "Is it any wonder th'Derbyshire farmer's about th'back and behindest there is?"

"No," said Flo willingly; and suddenly he laughed, all his seriousness shaking away.

"That's my turn, now it's yours. What's next?" he asked, stopping, having evidently been walking without thinking where he was going. Flo said again that she didn't mind. After looking at his big silver watch he decided that they should go to the ring. There were people three and four deep all along the rails, impossible to see past, but Jack went up behind a tall man in a heavy white mackintosh and a tweed cap and asked what was on.

"Finishing the judgin' . . . just about. Then it's the hunt parade." He noticed Flo. "Want her to come in?"

"Ay," said Jack.

"I reckon I can look over you two," commented the tall man, stepping aside.

Flo stared down a tunnel as it were, the sides of it consisting on the right of the necks, whiskers and billycocks of two men, and on the left of the collars, cheeks and black, rather sporty straw hats of two women. Sometimes the tunnel closed a bit and sometimes it widened, but at best all that she could see was about a yard square, though it extended right across the arena to the grandstand, which was packed from ground to roof with tiers of faces. She heard clapping, which began to the left of the stand and then spread swiftly and equally all round in the manner of ripples spreading from a flung stone. Then past the end of her tunnel trotted a man in a scarlet coat and a black cap with a long neb; seen for a second, then gone. Now the clapping and laughter was loudest along the near side of the ring.

"A grand lot, eh? As snappy as weasels," came from one set of whiskers.

"Tear it ta bits if they got owt; as keen as . . . knives. They've given 'em brandy or summat. Feed 'em on eggs an' such," said his back neighbour.

"Aren't they luvly," said the woman with the broadest brim, swaying rightward till the tunnel was temporarily blocked.

"Can you see?" asked Jack in Flo's ear.

"I can't," she answered, tantalized.

"Get on my back," said Jack, turning round. She protested. "Why not? Course you con." He bent forward and, because she wanted badly to see, she put her hands on his shoulders and vaulted up. He clasped his hands so that she sat on his upturned palms and felt safe, though foolish. Her thighs were splayed on his hips. She felt him small, yet firm, beneath her. The tall man grinned on a level with her. Hastily she looked away, forward over hats and heads, and saw just moving on to the straight at the opposite side the master and huntsman with twenty-three hounds round or behind their black horses, and finally the whipper-in, also on a black horse. Unexpectedly, for the first time, the sun came out almost as if from a touch on an electric switch and everything shone with new brightness: the pink coats, the white

breeches, the black boots, and the sleek horses; and the pack became a gay stream of liver, white and black, legs twinkling, tails waving, so unusual and funny to Flo that she tightened her knees and hands and laughed, completely forgetful.

Now the master lifted his horn and blew an unmusical note which nevertheless excited everybody. The horses cantered, the pack stretched out, loping easily. Down the straight on the near side again the canter became a gallop, and Flo seemed actually to feel the heavy thuds of the hooves. But the quicker speed made little difference to the hounds; they kept up with the same beautiful ease. Everybody shouted and waved and laughed, and the whipper-in snapped his long lash after two stragglers who looked bored, apparently having gone through the performance too often before. Eventually one of these slipped across the centre and sat and waited for the rest coming round and the applause he got was loudest of all.

"Oh, you should see!" exclaimed Flo, all at once remembering. "It's not fair . . ."

"I've seen it before," Jack answered in a low satisfied tone, intimately increasing the pressure of his arms against her. At once the hunt lost all attraction. She looked down on his straight upright hair and was suddenly tempted to feel it. Under her hand the bristleness disappeared; the hair was soft and unexpectedly warm, almost aglow, and her hand was arrested and stayed there momentarily as if from surprise.

"Eh, what you doin' . . . spoilin' my partin'?" Jack demanded, tossing his head, as if in anger, but laughing.

"Let me down, let me down," exclaimed Flo urgently, and at the same moment felt a sharp poke in the back. As she dropped a harsh voice exclaimed: "Na then, what the heckment . . .! You'll non cop train playin' pick-a-back."

Flo turned in a fluster. Mrs. Nadin's little eyes sparkled. Behind her Mr. Nadin stood straight and meek, but with a touch of pink on each cheek which seemed like proof that he had enjoyed himself despite his wife's arrival.

"Come on," said Mrs. Nadin. "If we dunna get gone there'll be noo gettin' out 'cos o' the crush."

She turned briskly away to the distant exit towards which already a steady flow was going. Mr. Nadin said, "Comin', Jack?"

"Non yet. I'll stay through," he answered.

Flo glanced her thanks, wondering whether he noticed her burning cheeks. Then, too, she turned and hurried after Mrs. Nadin.

Chapter 19

THERE was a crowd on Bakewell Station. Farmers stood in groups discussing what they had seen, occasionally breaking into gusty laughter. Several times Flo heard behind her, "How go, Emmott!" Mr. Nadin answered, "Non so bad. How's yourself?" but kept meekly in Mrs. Nadin's wake. She went up the platform to be in position to get in the front part of the train. Then the train was coming up the long straight line from Derby. A corridor coach drew up in their front, and Mrs. Nadin was in the first surge to the door, using elbows and her umbrella skilfully. Flo got held back and went up the step and through the door the thirteenth person after her. She did not know whether to turn right or left, but chanced left, and on the third seat found Mrs. Nadin with her umbrella guarding a place for her. She wedged in thankfully. Mr. Nadin was a moment or two in arriving, moving slowly up the aisle in the long stream.

"I'll goo on; maybe there'll be summat farther up," he announced.

They had their backs to the engine and could not watch him; Mrs. Nadin tried to, but the table between the pairs of seats prevented her. The whistle blew. The train got going with long powerful chuffs, very slowly at first, suggesting that the load it had just taken on was rather more than it had expected. Flo gazed past Mrs. Nadin through the big observation window. Suddenly her hand gripped on the table in front of her. She glanced at Mrs. Nadin. The little woman was searching in her handbag.

"You haven't lost anything, have you?" said Flo, unable in so brief a time to think of anything better.

"Non that I know of," said Mrs. Nadin ungraciously.

Flo dared to glance past her again. The tall unmistakable figure had been left behind and a smile spread from Flo's eyes downward, widening her full, pleasant lips.

"Enjoyed yourself?" asked Mrs. Nadin, softening. "It's non bin a bad show, though I've seen a lot a damn sight better."

She started then to talk with a thin woman opposite, and Flo looked out and wondered how Jack would get back, and whether he had travelled in the chara from The Bull. They seemed to get quickly to Miller's Dale, and there there was a great unloading. After the train had gone on the platform was nearly as full as at Bakewell. Mrs. Nadin stood on her toes and looked everywhere, and Flo pretended to look as well. Almost at once, however, the short local train chuffed in and there was nothing they could do but get in with the rest. Mrs. Nadin, after claiming a window seat with her handbag, stood obstructively in the doorway trying to watch everybody getting in elsewhere. Then without warning a porter slammed the door. She tugged angrily at the window strap so as to get her head out to tell him something, but the train started.

"Did you see the old devil?" she demanded.

"No," said Flo, guessing that he was not the porter.

"By . . . by . . . if he's slipped me agen, God help him," said Mrs. Nadin solemnly, and then most unexpectedly she shut up. Her hand gripped and ungripped on her umbrella. She did not speak again till they had left the local train and were making across the broad way between the two Buxton stations, for the train to Moss. Here she broke out: "The sly monkey! I'd smash his grin off if on'y I had 'im. Pub crawlin' home wi' the rest, bluecin' his brass in like a big soft baby. Not enough sense ta know how ta button 'isself."

That was the last. She seemed to become resigned. She walked out of Moss Station in her most business-like way, and Flo kept just behind. The lanky taxi-man was there, and with his tongue bulged out his left cheek secretly at Flo when he saw that they were still without the farmer.

"Didna yo' find 'im, missis?" he asked jovially.

Mrs. Nadin tucked herself into the car without replying. He spat and shut the door, and when he was in his seat contented himself with questions about the show.

"There were on'y one thing missin'," said Mrs. Nadin, "a class for donkeys."

In what state Mr. Nadin got back, whether drunk or sober,

Flo never got to know. He came some time after she had gone to sleep. In the morning he was up before them all and worked in brooding silence. Half-way through milking Flo saw him at the yard gate, so that the show had not enabled him to forget the hay. Mrs. Nadin nagged a little more even than usual, but it was plain to Flo that after his escapades the farmer could look after himself. His silence, his lack of retorts to her angry attacks, left his wife without ammunition, as it were. And so the matter passed and life became normal again, except for Flo's memories of the show. She wrote home a good description, telling of Jack, though she did not mention sitting on his back.

The return to ordinary routine was irksome. Dot, too, was in her worst mood.

"I suppose you'll have the decency not to sneak about anything you saw yesterday," she said disagreeably the first time they were left together in the kitchen.

"There was nothing to sneak about," answered Flo.

"You wouldn't have gone if I'd had my way."

"I know," said Flo.

After breakfast rain fell. Every day, sometimes heavily, sometimes only in occasional showers, some rain came and August wasted away with the hay in Lake Meadow going darker and darker and the new grass growing taller till the once proud cocks were almost lost.

"We'll cart it off an' fill Black Pit," said Mr. Nadin on the first Thursday in September, "it's only spoilin' t'other."

Thus all day they carted, and Flo from her bedroom could see the pale circles where the cocks had stood so long. She asked Bert if there was nothing else that could be done.

"It's goin' rotten, but it'll never rot," he answered cryptically. "The pit's best place for it."

Then, as they finished, the weather relented and let the clouds be driven away by a cool wind from the south-east. After the second day it was considered fit to begin to mow in Charlie Meadow, the eleven acres, and Flo was sent to follow the mower again. The meadow sloped to the left of the lane, where it ran beside the lake. Flo saw Dick Goldbourn by the water, but she was too busy to think much about him. After a while he reeled in and came to the gate and watched the

circling machine. He waved and Flo briefly shook her wooden rake in acknowledgement, but somehow she did not feel that she wanted to go near him. He wheeled himself to where Bert was mowing by the hedge and Bert leaned on the curved pole of his scythe and talked for ten minutes. Flo expected Mr. Nadin to shout at him, but the farmer went on shaking out at the south corner where the swaths lay thick on one another. Flo had expected him to be more impatient than he had been the first time in the hay, but he seemed not to bother, to have become resigned. She could not understand and felt that it was rather sad. The urgency, of which she had been so conscious during her first days of hay-making, was now not to be felt at all. Through so long waiting they had become stale; the work had become drudgery to the rest, though to her it was still exciting. She liked following the mower, watching the falling grass. She decided to ask Jack, next time she saw him, if he had ever done that job and whether it had fascinated him. She wondered when he would be coming again; she had not seen him since the show.

Day after day the cool wind kept on, making the men work in their jackets and Dot and Flo in scarves. But the grass dried quickly. It had not the colour of the first grass in Lake Meadow, but was much longer, lots of it over two feet, and heavy. There were few flowers left in and scarcely any pollen dust when the swaths were turned or shaken.

"But it's hay. It'll fill their guts . . . an' there's plenty of it. It'll make up for some of what we lost in Lake Meadow," said Clem while they rested the horses. He brought up his pipe from his side-pocket and filled and lit it and looked at Flo contemplatively. "By gum," he exclaimed unexpectedly, "done you know, you've filled out sin' you come here? You're gettin' a shape like Venus."

"Hadn't we better get on?" asked Flo coldly, moving a step farther from him.

"You're doin' all right," he commented, still appraising her as though she were in the ring at auction. "I've bin out wi' lots worse than you."

"Well, you're not going out with me," said Flo flatly. "I'm particular . . . an' I've somebody else," she added, and then felt surprised at herself.

"Oh, by gad," said Clem, spitting, "you've started, eh? Who is it?"

"Mind your own affairs," she retorted, though she knew that she had asked for it. "It's time we got on."

"The hell it is." His tobacco had gone out and he jabbed it down safe in the bowl with his little finger and then put the pipe back in his pocket. "Oh, so that's it, eh? I mun have mi eye on you. If it's one o' the lads from town, you'll ha' ta keep spry." He chuckled meaningly and slowly hitched his thigh over the spring seat and shook the rope lines with a loud and threatening, "Get yer!" The machine jerked off with a harsh chatter and Flo was thankful.

Week-end came and the hay was judged to be ready. The first load was brought home just after eleven. Flo had been kept in to help in preparing for the afternoon's expected guests, but she saw the great untidy load rocking past the gate to go in behind the barn where the stacks were to be made. Mr. Nadin came after the cart, but instead of going past he turned into the yard and tramped up to the house and planted himself in the doorway.

"We conna manage 'bout her; she's got ta come," he announced dourly, and with a jerk of his thick thumb he summoned Flo from the sink.

"And how the heck do I manage, you old fool?" demanded Mrs. Nadin; but he was going away and gave no sign of having heard. "If 'e had the sense of a louse an' could wait, 'e'd have as much help as 'e con use an' more," grumbled Mrs. Nadin to Flo; and then unexpectedly, "Well, you heard what he said."

Flo ran out, drying her hands on her brown sacking apron. Behind the barn a kind of rectangular platform had been made of logs and branches which was now being clothed with the first round of hay. Bert was rolling it off the load in great shaggy balls and already there was a mound there below.

"Way up, give 'er a chance," ordered the farmer morosely, and passed her a pikel to throw the hay where he wanted it. She dug in energetically and was shocked at the weight.

"You're non Samson; you'll non lift it all at once," said Bert. "Tek it in bits . . . off the top."

That was better, though it was hard work. Too often she

dug too deep, or in the wrong place and tugged hay from underneath. And sometimes, just as she got a good forkful, Bert dropped another ball right on top. She looked up, but always he had turned away and was searching with the tines of his fork for the edges of the next lot. And then a forkful came on top of her; she was suddenly smothered in a dry rustling mesh. Her fork was entangled. Her breath caught and she sneezed, and her eyes were filled with bits.

"Eh," shouted the farmer. "There's noo time for tricks. September 6 an' first load!"

Bert grinned; but after that he worked more methodically and Flo found it easier. The farmer went steadily round and round stacking with greatest care. Flo was surprised when she heard Bert's fork ring on the cart bottom. The load which had seemed so high and so big scarcely looked anything on the stack.

"Another twenty loads an' you'll begin to see something," said Bert, and glancing aside she found Dick Goldbourn at the gate and wondered how long he had been there.

"She's gettin' her hand in at everything; she'll be able to run the farm, if you keep her at it," said Dick.

"She's a good lass . . . for a young 'un," admitted the farmer, and she knew that Dick was looking closely. But suddenly she found that it didn't matter, and she let her eyes go to him in a friendly smile. His face was clear and looked well, but his body was big, and it seemed strange to her that she had ever thought that she might marry him, even if he had lots of money.

"I haven't had to call on your help lately. How's the foot?" he asked, smiling back.

"I've forgotten it," and she ran past him into the lane.

"You'll be wanted next load," Mr. Nadin shouted, but she was glad to get away.

Flo had worked hard since she came to Prettyfield, but never as hard as she worked now. The loads came every twenty minutes or so. Mr. Nadin would shout as he went past the gate, and out she would have to run. Struggling with the great hay tangles made her sweat, and by the third load the muscles of her arms and across her shoulders ached so much that she wondered if she would be able to keep

on. Only then it was dinner-time and the longer rest let her recover, though she knew that she was going to ache next day. In the afternoon Dot did most of the cabin work, but Flo had to do what she could. Mrs. Nadin seemed to have an uncanny power of knowing just how long it took to unload the hay, and if Flo didn't hurry as soon as the cart well had been emptied, over the barn roof would come: "Flo, naa! Come on theer."

Then there would be a tray waiting. There were hundreds of people that afternoon, so it seemed to Flo, because there were always trays waiting, and always there were pots to be carried back and washed. The dry week-end at last had enticed out walkers and picnickers who knew that winter would soon be back, though there were not many fishermen. The dull wet spell hadn't kept them away; it was the fine weather with its cool wind that they didn't like.

Flo as she walked to the cabin could see the loads being made up over the lane in Charlie Meadow. Clem was on top with great tousled forkfuls coming up to him from either side where she guessed Mr. Nadin and Bert were. They were working hard, too, so that Flo did all that she could willingly, even putting up with Dot's crossness. Twelve loads were stacked before dusk, and even then there was still work indoors. Flo brought the last of the pots from the cabin and bent wearily over the tin. All day the treatment she had given to her hands had been of the worst. Taking them with softened skin straight out of water she had had to grasp the pikel. In no time damp and friction had lifted a blister on the inside of the upper joint of her right thumb and another on the top joint of the first finger of her left hand. Then her palms had gone red and sore, but before blisters had come there the thumb and finger blisters had rubbed off. Now in the hot water her hands felt raw; every time she picked up a pot she flinched.

"You'll know what hay-time's like in a bit," said Mrs. Nadin.

"My word, I shall sleep," said Flo.

But, she didn't. Her shoulders and shoulder-blades were sore so that she could not lie easy. As she turned about she remembered what the fat woman had said in the train so long

ago about farming: "All work an' no play, *hand* all the mucky work . . . God help you." Only somehow the memory made Flo smile, and she cuddled her hands in the flannel of her nightdress between her thighs and after that remembered no more till she woke with the first show of dawn light over Moss Edge. She came awake gradually, and only after a long interval realized that for some reason she felt strangely happy. There was a pleasant gurgling tinkle from somewhere. Then all at once she understood; it was rain on the roof, in the gutters just outside the open window, in the down-spouts. And this was the cause of her happiness! It was guilty happiness, but rain meant rest. Her tired body had realized it even before she had come properly awake. She would have time to recover. Her hands were already a bit better. Oh, she was thankful; but she knew that Mr. wouldn't be!

Chapter 20

AND now it was the last day of the hay-making. It was Saturday again. A fortnight of hard but intermittent work had been done. Flo had got used to it. The skin of her hands had adapted itself and her arms and shoulders had grown accustomed to the strains. She was glad to be working this day for all the fishermen, the "regulars", had turned up, but instead of going out on the lake, they, also, were helping. There was the very tall, round-faced one with the big wart on his nose, and the bald man, and the younger sandy-haired man who was fond of singing to Dot at the piano, and there was the silly young man of whom Flo had once been scared. But to-day she was not scared of any of them. The silly young man was put on the stack to do Flo's job and she saw him looking at his hands and she knew the reason and smiled to herself. The carts were coming from Square Piece, which was beyond Charlie Meadow, looking into the little valley at the head of the lagoon. It was a longer way, but with the extra help the loads came at about the same intervals.

There were two stacks, both immense, nearly as big as the barn. Mr. Nadin called Flo to him. He looked down and said he had a spare horse coming and that she was to go raking.

"We'll get in everythin' while we con an' leave the field tidy."

"When will it come? Do I have to fetch it?" asked Flo, thinking it might be a horse from Willox's.

"He said 'e'd be here at three; 'e couldna come sooner. It's Jack Knight . . . he'll come up on th' stack an' help me."

"Oh," said Flo with gladness.

"You'll manage his hoss all right," said the farmer, as though she had been doubtful.

She ran back to the house to do all that she could, for it was already a quarter to three.

"They want me raking," she told Mrs. Nadin.

"What, you an' all! He'd have everybody i' Mossdÿche, ay an' in Moss, too!" exclaimed Mrs. Nadin; yet she did not object further. "We seem t'ave bin haymekkin' six months; happen 'e'll finish sometime."

"I hope so," said Dot. "Life's not worth living."

While Flo loaded the tray, taking as many pots at a time to the cabin as she could to save work later, she listened eagerly, but the old clock whirred and chimed and struck three, and chimed again before hoofs and the trundle of a float was heard.

"That's him. May I go?"

"Who's 'im?" demanded Mrs. Nadin, glancing with sharp eyes.

"Jack Knight; I'm to use his horse," said Flo.

"Ho!" exclaimed Mrs. Nadin. "I think I'll go misen; I reckon I could drive that tit."

"He said I was to go," protested Flo.

"An' dunna you think he'll ha' me?"

"Yes . . . yes," said Flo, confused. "Bu . . . but I didn't think you'd do it."

"You dunna know what I'll do," and the little woman drew the knife very straight and quickly across the tin of Quaker-oat "flap-jacks" which she was cutting into strips. "You're non interested in Jack 'issel', by any chance?"

"Why? No," said Flo.

"Noo, I thought not," said Mrs. Nadin with a disbelieving chuckle. "There's noo wenches as ever was interested in lads . . . ta hear 'em talk. But they aw mek fools o' themselfs an' get wed."

"May I go?" asked Flo, feeling red.

"Ay, but keep your eye on th' rakin', or you'll happen rake

up more than you want," warned Mrs. Nadin cryptically.

Flo ran out and found Jack unhooking. They had not met since the show though Flo had seen him occasionally driving along the lane. He let down the shafts of the float without looking, yet he knew her for he said, "Oh, yes . . . how now?"

Mike stared slowly round, looking old and wise in his baggy blinkers like an owl. Flo stroked his nose and his lower lip drooped in a friendly way.

"Dunna let 'im run off," said Jack, "an' dunna drive him into the lake. He's the on'y horse I have."

"If I can drive Colonel, I can drive him," said Flo.

"I dunno." His pale blue eyes met her's. "It isna the biggest horses as is always the awkwardest."

"I'll manage him."

"I think you will," he agreed seriously, still watching her so that she was forced to look away. "I think you'll manage anything you set your mind to . . . even the feller you marry." And he laughed.

"He'll not do me like Mister did Missis," said Flo. "Did you hear?"

"I come home in same chara."

"Oh, so you were as bad. Did you get drunk, too?"

"No, me an' the driver kept sober . . . I kept sober in case 'e changed his mind." Jack blinked, as if he couldn't believe himself. Flo guessed that he didn't drink and she felt glad.

"I should hate anyone to do me like he does Missis," she said. "I'd want someone I could trust."

"Like me?" Jack asked back at once.

"No," said Flo. "I'd sooner have Mike. Gee up!"

The piebald turned with the least expense of effort, swivelling on his rear feet. Jack stood looking broodingly after them. Just before she got out of sight past the house Flo turned, and as though surprised to see him still there, waved her free hand and playfully to herself imitated his funny, "Ta-ta the noo; see you some more." Then she said softly, "He's a funny man, isn't he, Mike? He's funny, but he's nice. I wonder if he ever says anything to you about me."

Mike pushed his nose sideways to rub against her hand holding the bit. Perhaps he was meaning to nod, "Yes", but she would have liked to have felt sure.

Then they were going through the field gate and there was the rake with its shafts dropped waiting. She hooked the hame chains and tossed the saddle chain over and buckled the belly strap. One of the carts was in the far corner with Bert on top. Only about five loads were left, and it would be a hurry if the raking was to be finished to time. Flo slapped the reins and Mike seemed to understand. How much easier it was than when her ankle had been hurt. With hand and foot together she made the tines clash and enjoyed it. Mike was easier to drive than Colonel, and she combed in long straight ribbons, leaving scarcely a windle anywhere. It was good to look on the clean field marked by faint wheel tracks and Mike's hooves in a kind of pattern. Riding swiftly to and fro she felt superior to the men labouring so slowly. The tall man with the wart and the bald man were reaching and the sandy-haired man was lugging coils from the hedge-side where the ground sloped too much for the cart. All of them moved sluggishly, as though weary, and in contrast Flo felt free like a swallow. The cool wind came down the lake and she looked upwind and breathed deep and was aware of the beauty of the little ripples running up the lagoon beach, always coming, though never getting any farther. On the point at the lagoon entrance was the figure that now she knew so well. She wondered if he had caught anything, but that was all. Then she drove round and hurried back to add to the line of tawdry rakings, which were not worth bothering about really, except for tidiness. But she *felt* that she was doing so much more good than Dick. There was just one thing that she would have had different; she would have liked it to have been Jack's field. She wondered whether his plans would ever come to anything. If only she could work for him and help him!

"What d'you think, Mike?" she asked aloud.

The piebald swung his ears back, but as he could not make anything of this as an order, very sensibly he plodded on. In at the gate came Mr. Nadin and looked round appraisingly. Nearly all the hay was gone. The three fishermen were slowly breaking the long rows left by the rake into great untidy pyramids. Flo had very nearly finished. All of them had worked on without tea, and there was the increasing coolness

of dusk coming off the water. Mr. Nadin trudged across in Mike's way. Flo stopped, looking down.

"When that's done follow a'ter the cart," said the farmer. "We'll have it all proper."

So the last cart rolled in and cruised round where the pyramids were. The rakings were light and loading was quick though untidy. Clem on top had a job to stand up; he rocked as on a stack of hair-springs. Flo manœuvred behind and round about, combing in everything. The farmer trudged round about, too, and occasionally beckoned for the rake, and occasionally stooped and gathered a few windles and rolled them into a ball to toss on the load. When the last forkful was thrown up and the load was tidied up with a hand-rake.

"It's a podgy beggar. Best have a rope," said Mr. Nadin.

"Nay, chance it," said Clem, sliding on to Colonel's saddle.

"There's plenty of us with it. We can hold it on wi' the forks."

Out the cart lurched, leaving a final handful on the gate stump. Flo had been told to follow, but the rake was wider than the cart.

"We'll ha' ta wangle," said Mr. Nadin. Gently he drew Mike on till the off wheel was through, then together he and Flo lifted and tugged the thing sideways.

"Thank God for that!" said the farmer, as he hooked the gate. "It's bin a bad time, but we've managed."

They kept side by side on the grass while Mike walked soberly ahead. Flo looked up the lake again to the grey hills of the valley end.

"You'll soon 'a bin six months," said Mr. Nadin, as if he had read her thoughts. "Your togs'll be paid for, an' you'll be gettin' your own brass. I'll see Missis about lettin' you have a few days home."

"Would you?" said Flo, scarcely believing.

"Ay, you've worked well. You've non 'ad much; happen we might pay some of your fare. But dunna tek it from me," he added with a hint of haste, "it'll all depend on Missis."

"Oh," said Flo, unable to say anything else. She looked away. The lake was blurred because of her eyes, and the grey hills were blurred. She wondered how far off Barrow was beyond them.

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